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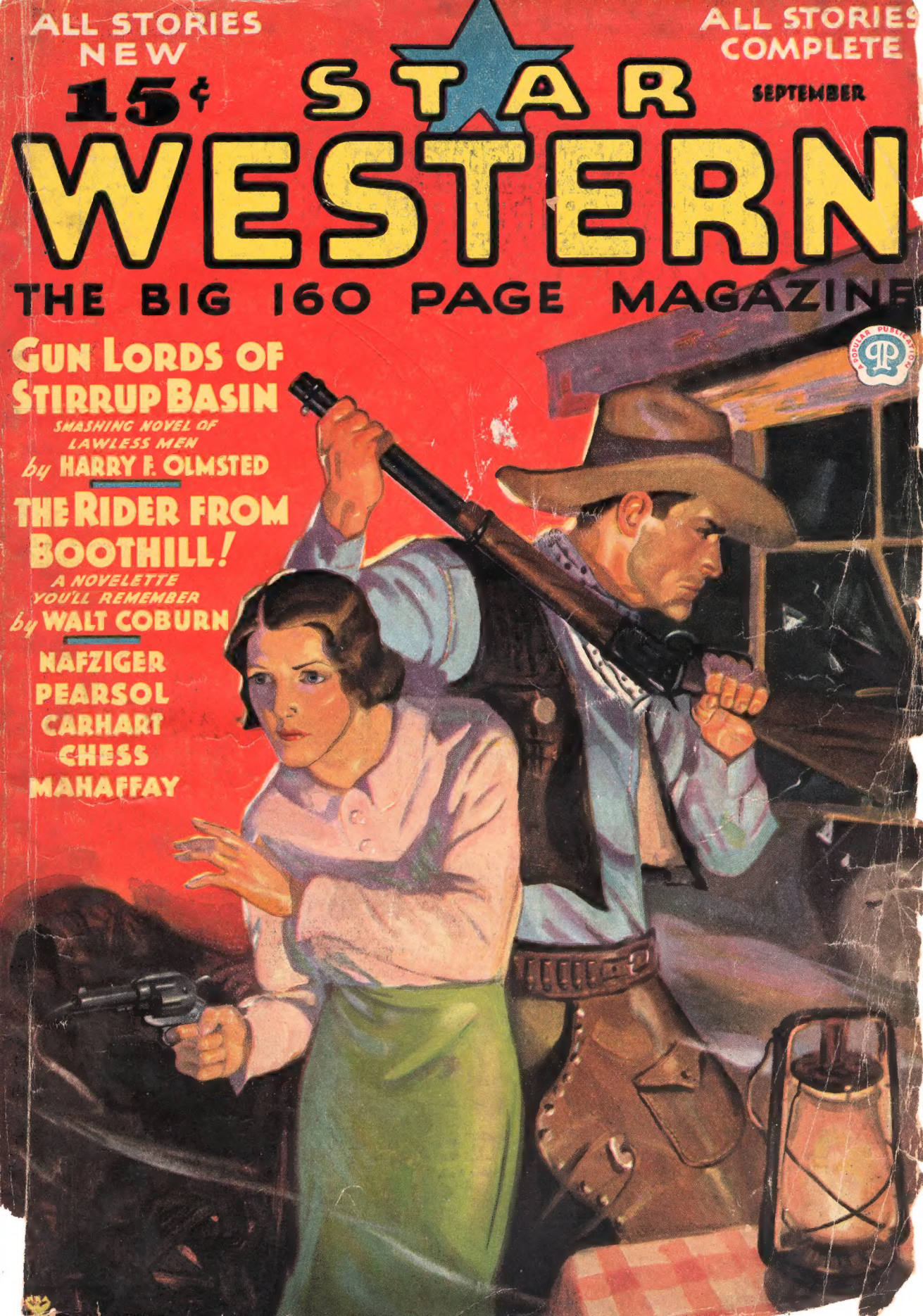

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Could Dan Stockton, with the courage of his wife to back him, run the gauntlet of his father's guns and the flaming rifles of Gail's people, to bring peace to war-torn Stirrup Basin?

GRAY WALLS MAKE GUNMEN.....By Arthur H. Carhart 126

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Cover Illustration by Tom Lovell

Story Illustrations by Hamilton Green, George Wert and Robert A. Cameron

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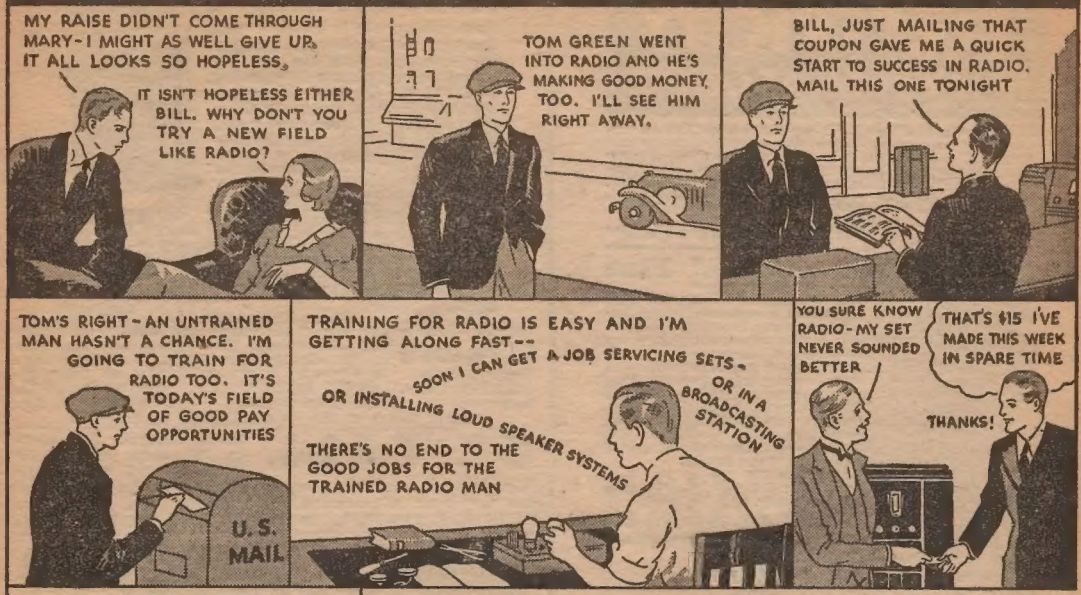
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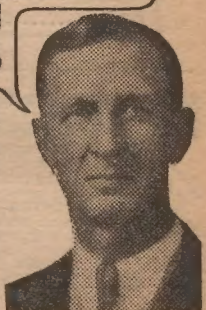

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FEW men who helped to bring the law into that tough and untamed region called the Western District of Arkansas looked less like a U. S. deputy marshal than did Zev Blake. His small size, his lined, worried-looking face and his prematurely graying hair, seemed to give the lie to the old single-action .44 he wore in the shoulder holster and to the little gold badge that was pinned to his undershirt.

From the moment he pinned on that badge, Zev Blake knew that he had reached his goal; a goal that from the first had been denied him whenever he had been defeated in the county election as sheriff or marshal of Smoky River. Peaceable, courteous, quiet, not one gunman or saloon bully had ever bestowed on him the dubious glory of combat. Yet in his own soul, little Zev Blake knew that he was an able fighter and had the courage of a man twice his size and weight. The trouble was, that he'd never gone out of his way to prove it.

For six months now, he'd been perfectly happy, tracking down a killer known as Cherokee Red in the blackjack and thorn thickets of the Strip. More than once he'd seen the outlaw and had traded lead with Cherokee's renegades; more than once he'd fought his way out of a tight spot alone, having gained another lead as to where Red and his bunch were hiding. At last, in company with Reb Jones, another of "the men who rode for Judge Parker" he rode toward the hidden log whiskey station where, it seemed, the renegade would make his stand-off.

Jones, his partner was perhaps a quarter mile ahead of Zev Blake on the crooked, treacherous trail when Cherokee Red opened up. Zev dragged his saddle-gun, jammed in the hooks and spurred ahead. His horse, a big hammer-head, line-backed dun he had bought three days before, was only half broke, but it took the trail with the untrammeled speed of a stampeding longhorn. Rifles blazed from the thicket to his left. Zev sent lead in return; heard a horse scream and glimpsed his partner down, pinned beneath his mount. Then two lucky shots found the little lawman; one taking the fleshy part of his right arm; the other stinging his horse's flank.

Zev's horse, enraged and frightened at the wound, wheeled and was off down the trail, leaving Zev's partner and a victorious renegade behind him. Zev, wounded, simply hadn't the weight to pull in his charging mount.

You can't convict a horse for cowardice nor for inefficiency. It was unfortunate that a surly bunch of ranchers, having no particular love for lawmen, met Zev on his runaway horse. Months later, their testimony helped to establish the fact that Zev wilfully left his partner there to die by Cherokee Red's bullets. Cherokee Red, with another killing against his already black record, made himself scarce. At the hearing in Fort Smith, Zev kept his mouth locked. If Fate was dealing from the bottom of the deck, he'd play out his hand as it laid.

Somewhere in Washington, a few small cogs turned; an obscure ex-rancher named Zev Blake, of Smoky Creek, Oklahoma, was returned to the life of private citizen.

They let him keep the badge, and his gun was his own. But bitterness roweled his heart. He sold his little cow-spread and tried to drown his sorrows in good red liquor. He awoke one day, with no money; with just his badge, his horse and his gun—about as near a broken man as ever lived.

Red-eyed, shaking, Zev Blake picked up a month-old newspaper in the bar, glanced idly at it; then started, his heart pumping with excitement. The picture of a man's face stared at him; though the hair and bushy beard were black, there was no mistaking those eyes. Cherokee Red, under the name of Billy Thomas, had been apprehended for some small crime and jailed. It was only then that Zev Blake looked at the date-line of the

paper—and his heart fell. The man was jailed in Texas—five hundred miles away.

It would take him two, possibly three, weeks to make it. By that time the renegade's trial might be over; he might be again a free man, ready to resume his work of killing and robbery where he had left off.

Zev went to the livery barn for his horse, and rode out of town, headed South.

For three weeks Zev Blake lived mostly on air, and water when he could get it. Handouts at isolated ranches were infrequent. Sometimes he did a few odd jobs at cow-town saloons; once he made a couple of dollars that way and ran it up to twenty-five at roulette. That night he and his horse had a good feed. Then he started again. Another night, sitting in at a game he was cheated, and backed out of the place with his gun-muzzle at the tinhorn gambler's middle, and enough gold-pieces in his pocket to get him to Albermarle, Texas, where he hoped to find Cherokee Red.

A very dusty and dilapidated saddle tramp slogged into Albermarle just at dusk, and sought out the jail. The lanky, grizzled sheriff listened to Zev and shrugged. He'd heard of Cherokee Red, but this man—Billy Thomas—had black hair; he was thin where Red's description was that of a stout, blustering man; and besides, Cherokee Red was up Colorado way at last accounts.

Praying that the sheriff had not heard of his dismissal from the U. S. service, Zev flashed his badge. The sheriff shrugged; this was out of any marshal's jurisdiction, but he lead the way back to the row of cells. The prisoner certainly didn't look like Cherokee Red, nor would he admit to that identity. He backed into the shadows, until Zev reached in one skinny hand, got hold of his black beard and jerked him close.

"No," said Zev to the lawman, with well-feigned disappointment. "Guess you're right. This ain't the man." But Zev Blake came away with three hairs from that beard in his fingers. He was still clutching those hairs as he went into the saloon and ordered a whiskey which he didn't drink. Applying the liquor to those hairs, he grinned as the dye came off to show them the auburn color he had suspected all along.

That night, Zev seemed to get very drunk indeed. But it was the spitoon in the Lone Star saloon that contained most of the drinks he bought. When the bar-room closed, Zev made his way to the jail-house. A deputy was on guard there. Zev didn't have trouble with him. But in getting the keys, the ruckus aroused the sheriff. A gun blasted. Zev Blake, unlocking the cell door, heard the slap of the sheriff's bullet as he shouted, "C'mon, Thomas, I'm cuttin' yuh loose!"

Then Zev heard the sheriff's shout of warning to the renegade, "Look out, Red, this gent is a U. S. marshal. I'll—"

A bullet from the sheriff's Colt tore along Zev's ribs. Another burned a jagged hole in his left shoulder. Zev's gun spat back in the darkness. He heard a groan and a thump, and one crooked sheriff dropped his gun and tumbled.

The story of that ride is legend in the annals of the federal government. How Zev Blake, twice a criminal himself, lashed the prisoner to the horse and tied himself behind, then rode double all the way to the Panhandle. Zev Blake himself, never knew just how he did it, and now, in the evening of his life, he's inclined to laugh at it, in his small ranch-house on the Red River. But maybe he'll unlock the third drawer of his desk in the ranch office and draw out, with pardonable pride, a framed certificate. There, in faded ink, you may see the seal of the United States, and under it, signed by a dead President, a reinstatement as U. S. deputy marshal to the Federal District of Western Arkansas. His term of office is to last as long as he does. And from the quiet strength of the wirey little body, he'll be U. S. Deputy Marshal Zev Blake for a good many years. . . .

—THE MAVERICK.

GUN LORDS OF

Feature-Length Novel by

Harry F. Olmsted

(Author of "Outlaw Challenge," etc.)

Could Dan Stockton stand up against his own kin in Stirrup Basin, for the love of a girl they all hated? Could he, with her courage to back him, run the gauntlet of his father's guns, and the flaming rifles of his wife's people, when both factions were riding to disastrous bushwhack war?

THE day was done. The scattered buildings of the Sleeping S Ranch, in their verdant settings of shimmering cottonwoods, seemed caught in the haunting spell of eventide. In the west, along the serrated crest line of the Seco Hills, the waning afterglow lingered. Eastward, the sky-reaching peaks of the

STIRRUP BASIN

An Epic Story of Rangeland Warfare

Apache Range were silhouetted darkly before the disc of a full, red moon.

The cowboys lolled along one side of the bunkhouse, smoking, lending their voices in the softly melodious chorusing of a profane range ballad. From the sprawling adobe ranch house, a smiling, handsome youngster emerged, dressed in his "glad rags," his spurs let out to the town notch, his wide hat tilted back on a dark, curly thatch with carefree insolence. Dan Stockton's project invited forgetfulness of the cares of the Sleeping S, which he rodded. He was going "gallin'."

His grin was one of pleasurable anticipation as he rose to the saddle and broke the animal into a lope toward the gate. An arresting voice from the vine-draped porch of the ranch house wiped away that grin, caused him to rein back scowlingly to face his father.

Old Hub Stockton, who had fought marauding Comanches and murderous Mescaleros for the right to settle the wild Stirrup Basin, sat slumped, yet unrelaxed. His full-fleshed body seemed to overflow the arms of his rawhide chair. He stared now at Dan with troubled eyes.

"Where yuh goin', Dan?" he asked tonelessly.

The resentment of youth flamed swiftly in the younger man. "Just takin' a ride, Dad."

"Looks like you'd git enough ridin' as a chore. Where yuh goin'?"

"I'm ridin' to the mesa!"

Dan was conscious of the working of his father's face, there in the gloom of the vines. He was conscious too of the sudden cessation of sound from the assembled punchers along the bunkhouse wall.

Old Hub Stockton shook his grizzled head in a stern gesture of finality. "Don't do it, son," he murmured, not unkindly. "Give it up. I've never dictated to yuh, or advised yuh. But the time's come when I got to. Put up yore pony! I've a reason fer wantin' yuh right here at home tonight."

Dan bridled. "Reason?" he echoed. "Le's have it."

Hub Stockton shifted his heavy shoulders restlessly. "We're holdin' a meetin' here tonight, son. Lawyer Gabe Ganton's back from Santa Fe. The neighbors is droppin' in, an' . . . ."

"Lawyer Ganton!" Dan growled. "If he's comin', that's my cue tuh be somewhere else. I don't like that jigger, Dad —never did like him an' never will. Business bein' slow, he's stirrin' up water-right squabbles among folks that ain't got water troubles, an' never would have if left alone. No sir, I'll feel a heap better if I don't have tuh look at the buzzard."

He reined about, would have started away save for his father's fervent protest.

"Hold on, Dan! You don't wanta talk thataway until you've got all the facts. We put up money tuh send Ganton tuh Santa Fe to find out about that water. He got back yesterday with damnin' an' startlin' news that'll convince you or any other doubtin' man. He's comin' here tonight an' I'd like you to hear him out. If you do, I'm satisfied you'll want no more truck with them Texicans, let alone build up tuh marryin' one uh their wimmen. In th' meantime, son, I'm forbiddin' you tuh see her."

Dan stiffened in youth's age-old rebellion against paternal dictation in affairs of the heart. "Dad," he said icily, "I lissen to you in most things, but now yo're goin' too far. This shyster buzzard's poisonin' yore mind ag'in' them mesa folks. I know 'em better'n you do—better'n he does. They're my friends, just as they'll be yore friends if you let 'em. I've promised to meet Gail Dawson on the mesa tonight, an' I'll be there!"

He spurred his mount viciously, threw it into a swift lope away from the porch.

DAN STOCKTON rode with bitterness—fuming that anyone should, for any cause, choose to interfere with his courtship of glamorous Gail Dawson. Piquant, flaxen-haired Gail, vixenish daughter of old Boone Dawson—leader of a clan that had emigrated from Texas drouth lands to settle the Painted Mesa more than a year before.

Thinking of the girl, and his rose-tinted future with her, Dan remembered little of that swift ride to the mesa. Riding at his stirrup was the dogging image of his father, sitting crushed and disappointed on the porch of the Sleeping S ranch house. That phantom saddle mate of trouble stilled Dan's laugh, dampened his wonted enthusiasm as he paralleled the bank of brawling Apache Creek to the trysting place—the spreading walnut tree beneath the mesa rim.

Swinging down, Dan trailed the reins, climbed the angling trail to the huge rock set like a landmark into the rim. Gail was there before him, a lonely little figure

against the silent immensity of black-curtained night. As Dan stepped upon the flat top of the boulder, Gail turned and came to him. She pressed herself into the comforting sweep of his strong arms, much as a frightened child seeks the arms of its mother. And Dan held her close, sensing in her trembling body the same darkly troubled stirrings that roweled him.

Neither spoke. Words seemed in that moment to be such weak and futile things. Now Dan led her to the edge, and there sat quietly, hearkening to the lifting murmur of Apache Creek and staring across the basin to where the lighted Sleeping S told of unusual activity there.

"Dan," Gail murmured at last, "if trouble comes to Stirrup Basin . . . between your folks and mine, would it make . . . make any difference?"

"Between us?" he asked, startled.

"Between us."

In all the Stirrup Basin there was but the one thing Dan wanted. The Sleeping S heritage, the mantle of valley leadership that must inevitably fall from Hub Stockton's shoulders to his own, the good will of rough and kindly cowfolks—all these were as nothing compared with his love for this girl.

"Trouble," he said sagely, "is like a nightmare. If a feller keeps awake an' in his right mind, he won't let trouble sic 'im at his neighbor's throat. Or let himself be drawed into a hunt fer other folks' troubles. The's no reason fer yore kin an' mine to be liftin' their hackles at one another. The's less reason fer trouble ever splittin' you an' me. Would it make any difference to you, honey?"

"No!" Her fiercely-spoken, single-word answer fired him.

"Then why chance the lightnin' tuh strike, honey? We've got our own lives to live, our own troubles tuh face. Will you marry me, with the understandin' that if trouble moves in, we'll move out? We'll do what our own folks done—move West an' start a spread of our own. Will yuh?"

"When?" she asked, breathlesly.

"Now!" he rushed on. "Tonight! Why wait? We'll ride into Stirrup an' . . . ."

She laid restraining fingers over his lips. "Dan!" she whispered. "It'll take courage. Mebby more'n we've got. Do you think we can be strong enough?"

"I can, honey. How about you?"

"Dan," she breathed again, avoiding his direct query. "I'll met you here tomorrow night at this time. To ride with you wherever you say . . . always."

"Always," he echoed, and kissed her.

Then she had broken away from him and was gone into the night.

Dan was whistling as he loped toward the Sleeping S.

THE Sleeping S was ablaze with light. Every rack was full of horses. In answer to summons, Stirrup Basin was meeting this night in the Sleeping S ranch house to hear the message of Gabe Ganton, buzzard-like shyster of Stirrup town. Ganton, who had patronized his way to near-leadership of the valley cowmen was a man who had griped Dan at first sight, and at each subsequent meeting.

Dan spat his distaste, scowled as he drew his saddle and slapped his mount into the corral. Reluctantly he clanked toward the house, started as a figure moved out from the bunkhouse to intercept him.

"Hello, feller!" It was Red Curnan, flaming-haired tophand of the Sleeping S. "I was scairt you wouldn't come. Yore dad told me he believed you'd change yore mind an' come back. He put me out here tuh watch an' send yuh in the minute you arrived. It's war, boy, an' it can't come too soon tuh suit me. Them mesa Tehanners is fixin' tuh swipe the valley water, way I git it. You know what that'll

mean. When you hear what Ol' Ganton's spillin', you won't be half so sweet on that Dawson filly. We're due tuh heat some irons, if I don't miss my guess."

"Aw, shut up!" Dan's temper slopped over. "The best part uh yore cowboyin', Red, is done in the bunkhouse."

Dan stepped around him and continued on to the house. He liked Red, admired him as an efficient, fearless cowhand. But he was in no mood now to appreciate the boy's swift flaunting of the spirit of unprovoked war. It was typical, mused Dan, of the underlying cause of many an ill-advised range conflict. Brave youngsters, who could never lead, would spit in the devil's eye to prove their loyalty to the Old Man. And they cared naught for the ethics involved.

Stiff with resentment, Dan let himself into the long, smoke-filled living room of the house. It was choked with cowmen and their hands, men who had known Dan for years, and who smiled at him now as he paused just inside the door.

At the front of the room, Hub Stockton turned in his chair at the interruption. His thoughts, printed there for all to read, fetched a sly grin to Dan's lips. It was as if the old man had said aloud: "I thought you'd come to yore senses an' come back. I figgered you'd put a man's work before a night's lollygaggin' with that mesa gal. Thanks, son."

Facing the assemblage, with suave and studied command, stood a tall, cadaverous man in the middle forties. His wide, lipless mouth was twisted into a mirthless caricature of a smile and his hollow, deep-set eyes held the wavering shadows of unreadable subterranean thoughts. His low-pitched voice was as dry and flat as the rustle of wind through the dead leaves of fall.

"For the benefit of late arrivals," Gabe Ganton said cynically, "I'll brief my remarks that have gone before. Knowing that certain interests were coveting the waters of Apache Creek, in which every one of you has a riparian right, you gentlemen sent me to Santa Fe to safeguard your authority over those waters. We were too late. The very day I arrived, filings were made for the surface flow of Apache Creek, under name of Horatio Brown. Now—" a tinge of fire crept into his droning voice—"that brings us to the real business of this meeting. What are you going to do about it?"

"Why do anything?" barked Dan, belligerently. "Horatio Brown, whoever he is, can't hurt us with his paper filin'. All Apache Crick means to us is stock water, after the west side springs an' Seco Hills seeps fail in dry weather. No matter what this feller does with Apache Crick, there'll allus be enough water comin' down tuh fill our needs. What's all the fuss about?"

The lawyer's gaunt face set in bleakly morose lines. He hid his mouth behind a bony, long-fingered hand, let a racking cough shake him. His voice came chokingly, pregnant with honeyed acrimony.

"Young man," he sneered, "is there any doubt in your mind that Horatio Brown is an agent for our very good friends on the mesa, the Dawsons?"

"Plenty doubt. But what if it's true? Suppose the Dawsons have filed on the water? Does that call fer stirrin' up a fuss with 'em?"

"That and other things call for the undivided attention of every man in the valley," countered the lawyer, icily. "Perhaps not all of you know that the Dawsons are starting to build a dam to impound the waters of Apache Creek, beyond the mesa. . . ."

"That's not news," interrupted Dan. "If anybody here don't know that, they must be deaf, dumb an' blind. What if the Dawsons do build a dam. . . .? They're aimin' tuh store water fer use on the

mesa so they can raise alfalfa an' corn tuh fatten cattle. I admire 'em fer their enterprise. We ain't usin' the water. If they can, more power to 'em!"

THE lawyer's face was a bloodless mask as he pressed the tips of his fingers together and lowered at Dan with mock piousness. "The young gentleman," he intoned, "is in ignorance of the facts. Let me remind you all that the Dawson dam is being built in the narrows, just below the junction of the North and South forks. That dam will flood the broad flat known as Devil's Pocket, storing two full years flow of the stream, with no provision for releasing water at its base. They propose to raise the water to mesa level, take it out in a ditch and release it at the foot of the Apaches, for some kind of irrigation purposes. . . ."

"Unless they close the headgate an' let the water waste over the spillway!" broke in Dan.

"Which of course they will be glad to do," sneered the lawyer, ". . . . for a price. Gentlemen, don't be deluded by unsound advice. From the minute water starts backing up behind that dam, and thereafter, this end of Stirrup Basin will look upon the dry wash of Apache Creek. The purpose of the Dawsons is plain. They will divert the entire flow into that shallow trough at the east border of the mesa, use what they need and dump the rest over the basalt rim, four or five miles below Stirrup town. They'll let down only such waters as you men pay for . . . . through the nose!"

Dan laughed derisively. "A purty bugaboo," he snorted. "Like the kind they use to frighten kids. I've talked with the Dawsons about their plans—an' the plan you've just explained ain't no part uh theirs."

"Oh," mocked the lawyer. "They've explained it to him, gentlemen. And he takes it all, hook, line and sinker. Which makes me think that a certain young woman of the Dawson clan is more loyal to her people than Dan Stockton is to his . . ."

"Keep her name outa this!" raged Dan. "Don't forget that, you buzzard!"

The subdued murmuring of the cowmen, as they followed the duel of wills, rose to a tumult as Old Hub Stockton bounced to his feet. His eyes were blazing.

"Shut up, Dan, an' sit down! You've talked a heap too much fer yore own good . . . or ours. Sit down! I'll do the talkin' fer the Sleepin' S from here out."

"All right!" Dan's tones were bitter. "You do the talkin'. But my advice to yuh all is tuh do yore talkin' to the Dawsons, face tuh face like men. You'll play hell out-talkin' this buzzard shyster!"

"You mean . . ." Old Hub's jaw sagged unbelievingly, "that you're takin' the Dawson side uh this augerment?"

"I mean," retorted Dan, with spirit, "I'm takin' no side in a useless scrap stirred up by a meddlin' shyster."

For a long minute, Hub Stockton looked at his son. When he spoke, it was in a softly condemning voice. "I fought the Injuns," he murmured, as if to himself, "fer the right tuh build this spread you'll some day own. My dad fought with Doniphan at Sacramento an' Chihuahua City, in Mexico. My grand-dad slung a flint lock from behind cotton barricades, with Andy Jackson at New Orleans. You'll be the first Stockton, son, who wouldn't fight for what he wants."

"Not me," snapped Dan. "I'll fight fer what I want. At the drop of a hat. An' that's just what I'll fight fer an' nothin' else."

He was thinking about Gail as he spoke and thanking her for the privilege of fighting in her behalf. He was smiling as he turned on his heel and left the room. But there was no smile on the face of his

disappointed sire—nor in the smouldering eyes of Gabe Ganton.

Emerging from the light into the porch gloom, Dan almost bumped into two men who stood listening just outside the doorway. They were hulking, gun-hung strangers who made no move to allow him to pass. Dan glared at them with unmasked antagonism.

"Well," he barked. "What do you two want? What's yore business here?"

"What do you care?" countered one of them. "We're with Gabe Ganton, takin' orders only from him an' stayin' right here till he's ready tuh ride. Savvy?"

Dan eyed the fellow appraisingly, from the toes of his fancy bench-made boots to the tip of his cone-peaked hat and back to his twin tie-downs.

"Gabe Ganton, eh?" he drawled, icily. "I savvy. An' I can't say I'm surprised."

Dan moved around them, strode wordlessly past the Sleeping S cowhands gathered about an open window, and went to his room.

CHAPTER TWO

Cowboy's Wife!

IT was night again in Stirrup Basin. Dan Stockton had spent the whole day in town, doing the hundred-and-one things any prospective bridegroom considers necessary before his marriage. Yet he was never so engrossed that he couldn't react to the tension that seemed to have gripped the rangeland.

He was conscious that men stared at him queerly, as if he were some invading alien. Townsmen clustered in bunches at the principal corners, talking in hoarse whispers. Once, while he was seated in the barber chair, Dan saw Gabe Ganton shuffling down the street with his awkward, furtive glide. His two gunman-bodyguards dogging his steps. Later he saw the three of them ride out of town toward the upper valley.

Not until dark, had Dan left Stirrup town. And now, as he took a leisurely lope along the mesa toe, the stars hung low and brilliant. A full, red moon soared above the peaks of the Apaches, spotting the rangeland with weird etchings of high light and pooling shadow. It was a quiet, restful hour that failed to soothe Dan. Somewhere beneath it was a hint that its placidity was deceptive. Trouble rode the fresh night breeze.

With an effort, Dan cast off his spell of depression. If trouble was afoot, it was no part of his . . . or Gail's. Trouble there might be for them . . . what human can escape it? But it would be the trouble of those who plan and build, rather than those who plot and destroy.

Now his horse, well acquainted with this nocturnal visiting, turned off the foothill trail and into the arroyo of Apache Creek. The purling of cool water was in his ears. Somewhere just ahead, Gail waited to go away with him, unless. . . .

Disturbed by a lingering doubt, Dan reined in under the gloomy canopy of the big walnut tree, below the rock. A figure stirred in the shadows. . .

"Gail, honey!" Dan's voice reflected all his relief at finding her awaiting him. The cold glimmer of moonglow on a blued steel barrel froze the glad cry in his throat. A gruff command stiffened him.

"Not Gail this time, feller! Careful . . . better sky them dewclaws!"

Alarmed, angered, wondering, Dan elevated his hands. The man came from the bushes, stood before him. It was one of the Dawson clan—a nephew of Old Boone Dawson himself. The man's soft laugh was eerily unpleasant.

"Nope, not Gail. Never no more. I'll say this though fer you valley jaspers: There's nothin' the matter with yore nerve."

Dan filled his lungs, shook loose his taut nerves and flashed an unconvincing grin. "What's the big idea?" he demanded, evenly. "What you think yo're doin'?"

The man shook his head. "Us mesa men is done thinkin'. From here out, we know. An' when we know, I don't mind sayin' we'll be no part uh bashful in sayin' our say, an' doin' our do. Really I orta dropped yuh when you rid in. Next time I will. Rein yore pony around an' burn breeze back to yore flats. An' if yuh hone tuh stay healthy, you'll keep on the west side uh yore shadder. Git!"

Dan's grin had faded; his eyes were slitted and dangerous. "What's the meanin' uh this?" he demanded. "Does Boone know yo're gettin' playful thisaway?"

"Boone knows everything that's done on this mesa. His orders was tuh not waste good lead on yuh unless yuh showed fight. Or unless you plumb disregarded my pointed warnin' not to cross the deadline again."

"Deadline?"

"The deadline is this rim, the outpost guard answered. "Don't forget it! An' don't cross it! You know what it's all about better'n I do, so we won't waste lip over that. Git movin'!"

Anger swelled in Dan. Yesterday he was welcome here. Tonight he had come to take a bride from among these people, only to find himself banned. Old Hub Stockton had been right—trouble, deadly and implacable, was rustling its foul pinions over Stirrup range. It looked too like Gabe Ganton had been right in his judgment that Gail Dawson was truer to her clan than Dan was to his. Dan had ridiculed them both, had smiled scornfully at the prospect of the Texans starting trouble. But how could one smile away this unthinkably swift transition?

Burning with futile resentment, clutched by a clammy fear and a hurt that paralyzed his powers of argument, Dan nodded bleakly, reined about and trotted down the river trail in the monlight.

His brain was afire as he let the pony take its own pace. Thoughts of the girl imprisoned up there on the mesa stirred in Dan a growing determination to turn about, slip past that guard at the walnut tree, face the Dawsons and satisfy himself as to what they really planned to do. And he had to know whether or not Gail had succumbed to the numbing virus of impending war.

Acting upon the thought, Dan reined in, sat hesitant for one bleak moment. The soft beat of a pony's hoofs arrested his movement to turn back, sent his hand streaking to the grip of his holstered gun. A single horse was being spurred swiftly up the trail, from the direction of the valley. Dan reined into the brushy gloom, waited. . . .

NOW the lone rider swung around a bend, limned sharply in the moonglow. Dan strained his eyes. And as the rider drew abreast of him, he leaned forward in his saddle.

"Gail!" Dan's voice, pregnant with clashing joy and doubt as to why the belated girl should be coming from that direction, rang through the night. Gail reared her pony straight up, whirled him about as Dan shoved out to meet her.

"Thank God!" She was laughing shakily as she held out a gloved hand that he made no move to accept. "Dan, I . . . ."

"You weren't at the tree," he growled, with masculine severity. "An' you're comin' from the west. What's happened?"

"Lissen!" Bleakly she ignored his rebuke. "It's trouble, Dan! The same trouble we agreed was no part of our own. It's taking in the whole valley, Dan. It'll take us in too, if we stay. Oh, my dear—" her eyes were fixed upon his, hungrily—"do you still feel strong enough?"

"I did," he murmured, grouchily, "till

one of yore boys met me at the tree with a gun. He made me feel plumb unnecessary. How strong do you feel?"

"Stronger than ever, Dan. Tonight my father forbade me to leave the house, warned me against ever seeing you again and confided he was sending one of the boys to the tree to tell you a few things. I—" her voice broke—"I was afraid they'd kill you. So I stole out of the house, saddled up and rode around by Badger Gulch to warn you. But I missed you at the mouth of the arroyo and rode up here. I hope you haven't changed, Dan. I . . . I can't go back now . . . ever. My father is a stern man."

"Too much sternness in the Stirrup," murmured Dan, "and not enough brains. Why go back at all? Let's us go down to Stirrup town just as we planned. We'll be married an' then. . . ."

"And then. . . .?" she echoed.

"Then, if the sign is right," finished Dan, hurriedly, "ride away from all this."

She answered with a grateful little laugh, with a swift lift of the spurs as she led the way toward the valley again. They swept out of the arroyo, across Apache Creek at the crossing, riding stirrup to stirrup. Each was silenced and awed by the procession of his own torturing thoughts. Each was deviled by the feeling that comes to partisans who ride away from what others, at least, consider his own. Yet both were buoyed by the belief that their own problem was the greater, the more vital one. . . .

Finally Dan turned to face the girl, and broke the silence.

"Gail," he demanded, "are you shore this is best fer you? What . . . what if something should happen? The way things are shapin' up, you might be a widow on yore weddin' day."

"In which case," Gail answered steadily, "we will have lost . . . trying. To lose you the other way would be worse. I'm not afraid. When I was little, my mother used to count hoofbeats, not daring to look lest some of the menfolks hadn't returned. It seems that is the cross all pioneer women must bear. What my mother faced, so can I."

It was said softly, in the disillusioning glare of quiet thinking and with none of the heat engendered in man-conflict. That unaffected statement of fact warmed Dan, made him realize he was face to face with the thing that had driven a brave breed forward to the winning of the West. It humbled the man, and fired him to try to match that courage, step by step, down life's troubled trail. It dispelled the last of his doubt, left him once again in perfect tune with the sweep of this wild land.

A hundred years ahead, the trail dipped through the fringe of a narrow tributary wash. It was a gloomy place, made to order for murder business. Eyes hard upon that crossing, Dan slowed the pace, rolled a cigarette and thumbed a light. He cupped the match so its beam lighted up his face.

From the crossing came a muffled curse: "Cripes . . . Dan! I figgered you two was Tehanners prowlin' down offa the rim!"

A man stepped from the willow scrub, a rifle trailing in his hands. It was Red Curnan, Sleeping S tophand. Dan snorted.

"You have a way uh receivin' yore thoughts, Red. What you doin' here?"

"Doin'?" Red's tone was rebuking. "Doin' what you an' ever' other valley man orta be doin'—standin' a hitch at guardin' trails—ready to shoot the first Texican that drops offa the rim.

"More and more bloodsweatin', eh?" sneered Dan. "Who sent yuh out here?"

"Gabe Ganton! We agreed last night tuh be guided by his orders in this trouble. His first 'un was tuh spot the trails with gun guards, on the chance the Dawsons is plannin' raids from the mesa. The' ain't

as many out as there'll be from now on. But the's plenty an', if I was you an' was ridin' around with a Dawson gal, I'd be purty shore uh my trails. Where yuh goin', Dan?"

"I'm ridin'," returned Dan, coldly, "to Stirrup town tuh get married. Then I'm ridin' tuh rout you gun guards offa valley trails. It's a nutty idea fostered by a man that's as crooked as a new rope an' as full uh kinks. You orta have sense enough tuh see through him, Red. Now see here; you scabbard that gun an' get on back to the Sleepin' S. If anybody raids that, then it's time enough tuh start warrin' . . . ."

"But Dan. . . ."

"I don't wanta hear it. I'll be out to the ranch in a couple hours at most. If you ain't there when I get back, I'll make out yore time. As long as I'm ramrod of the outfit, I'll run it. An' Gabe Ganton be damned!"

HE left Red gaping at him, spurred down into the gloomy woodland with Gail riding silently at his flank. The pitiful slump of her slender shoulders spoke eloquently of an added depression resulting from what she had heard; the firm cast of her mouth and the glitter in her eyes told plainer than words her deathless determination to cast her lot with this lance-straight youngster who loved her.

And so they came to Stirrup town. As they cantered down the dusty street, dimly revealed in the glare of saloon lights, they were both conscious of the stares of clustered men. Those men found, in the sight of this pair, new fuel for the fires of their heated war talk. They were men whose forte was talking and not fighting—who speculated now upon the appearance of a valley man with a mesa woman.

Just as he had felt the unfriendliness of the place earlier in the day, Dan felt it stronger now. It was present even in the attitude of the dour little minister, in the church parsonage. The man was short, nervous, utterly lacking in the fatherly sympathy that is supposed to characterize the marrying divine. He called his wife as a witness, hurried into the ceremony. His words sounded strained, inadequate.

". . . . and now, if anyone can show cause why this man and this woman should not be joined together in the holy bonds of wedlock, let him speak now or forever after hold his peace. . . ."

He paused, cast his restless eyes toward the street. His wife, patently unhappy, wrung the corner of her apron The raucous, blaring discord of a saloon hurdy-gurdy drifted in the open window. Dan frowned. Why didn't the man get on with it. He acted as if it were a sin to marry this pair, as if he would delay it to the last possible moment.

From somewhere at the remote border of the town lifted a growing turmoil. Out of it grew the clatter of a pony's hoofs, the strident bawling of a name. Dan's name!

"Dan! Dan Stockton! Dan, where yuh at?"

Dan started, hearkened to the answering voices that betrayed his whereabouts. Beside him, Gail was trembling, eyeing him with an awful fear. The hoofbeats were nearing now and the minister was looking at Dan questioningly. The young cowman shook himself.

"Get on with it!" he demanded.

The minister choked. His voice droned on in the fateful questions. Both answers came forcefully, affirmatively. Then . . . .

". . . . forasmuch as you have consented together in holy wedlock, have given and pledged your troth and declared same by joining hands, I now pronounce you . . . ."

Outside a man hit dirt, came running toward the parsonage. Calling Dan's name. The words stuck in the preacher's

throat. Dan lanced him with his eyes, growled.

"Finish it!"

The holy man flushed, finished with a rushing exhalation of breath.

". . . . man and wife!"

Behind them, the door flew open. A man plunged into the room, his breath coming haltingly, his eyes wide and writhing, his face working with excitement, anger and fear.

"Dan!" he gasped. "What a hell of a thing tuh be doin' at a time like this. Marrying a Dawson. . . ."

"Cut that, Red!" warned Dan, crisply. "What's all the hollerin' about?"

"Yore dad, Dan! Aced from ambush! The Dawsons has opened the jackpot; they've shot Ol' Hub Stockton tuh doll rags!"

Dan recoiled. "Dead?" he croaked.

"Not yet, feller. But damn close to it. He's askin' fer yuh an' you'll need tuh give over this soft stuff an' git out there if you hone tuh see him again. C'mon!"

CHAPTER THREE

Boothill Ticket

FOR a seemingly endless minute of agony, Dan Stockton stood rooted in his tracks. The Dawsons had struck, just as Gabe Ganton had prophesied. But why? From all the sign, there was one reason, at least, why the valley men might feel justified in striking at the mesa clan. But what possible cause could the Texans have for violence?

"Tell me about it!" he ordered. "Who saw it? Who knows for certain that the Dawsons done it?"

"Saw it?" Red scoffed. "Nobody. It was dark . . . not over an hour an' a half ago. Ol' Hub was sittin' in his office talkin' with Gabe Ganton. The window was open. Some dry-gulchin' son slung a shot through it just as yore dad rose from his chair. Ganton emptied his gun out the window, but he was shootin' blind. C'mon . . . ." his hand went out to Dan's arm. "Le's get goin'."

Dan braced himself. "The dirty dogs! The filthy, murderin' cowards!" he raged. "Somebody's gonna die fer this, Red, if I ain't forgot all I know about readin' sign."

He lifted his eyes to Gail. She was staring at him through the guttering lamp light, her eyes dark pools in a dead-white face. But she held herself with pride.

"There's some mistake," she murmured, dazedly. "The Dawsons don't fight that way. Man to man, with guns . . . yes. But from the brush . . . never. Someone else did it."

"Someone else. . . ." Dan echoed scornfully. "What someone? There's never been a whisper uh trouble in the Stirrup till the Dawsons settled on the mesa. The valley men are friends—have allus pulled together. An' now. . . ."

Again Red tugged at his arm. "Lissen, feller! Are you gonna auger this shootin' out here or are yuh gonna ride tuh make the Sleepin' S before yore dad. . . ."

Dan straightened, his mouth a grim gash. "I'm ridin'," he decided fiercely. "An' without losin' no more time."

He whirled on his heel, followed Red outside. Both men hurled themselves into their saddles, sank the spurs and roared through the aroused town. Dan led the way, recklessly, streaking beneath the coldly glittering stars. He was trying to quiet his mind to the end that he could reason out a possible motive for this swift and deadly change in the tempers of those mesa men. But all his thoughts led him inevitably back to Gail. And then he was stabbed by a startling surmise. The girl! That could be it. The Dawsons, incensed at losing Gail, might have retaliated by striking at the father of the man who had taken her. So perfectly did the idea

seem to fit the case, that Dan curbed his pony with a cruel bit—so abruptly as to almost pile Red, who rode directly behind him. Red swerved past, cursing. And Dan waited for Gail to draw alongside. Her failure to do so, caused Dan to turn his eyes backward. The trail was empty. Gail was not with them.

THAT was like cold water in Dan's face. Thunderstruck, he sat there watching Red wheel and come back. He had assumed that she was right with them.

"Red!" he cried, hoarsely. "Where's Gail?"

"How would I know?" rapped the redhead. "If you can't keep track uh yore women, how do you expect me to?"

"Did she start out with us? Did she turn off? Is she headed fer the mesa?"

"Same tuh you," snapped Red Curnan. "An' many of 'em. Lissen, Dan, tuh hell with the woman. Yore dad is bad shot an' . . . ."

But Dan wasn't waiting to hear him out. With a muffled curse, he whirled his pony back along the trail, cursing himself for his carelessness. He had feared for Gail lest some of her clansmen widow her on her wedding day. And now . . . now he, himself, had widowed her at the altar.

It left a gnawing fear in Dan's heart. And there was an awful emptiness within him. He realized now, more than ever before, how badly he needed Gail . . . and the cool, deliberate courage of her. His father was severely wounded, probably dying. That meant the Sleeping S would be his to direct. That meant that he must take the oldster's place in the councils of the cowmen, to pass upon the moves of this range war that had struck like a sword of doom. Could he be strong enough to stop it before it swung into the bloody carnage such as Lincoln County and the Tonto Basin trouble had known? The answer was plain. With Gail's strength to sustain him, there was nothing he couldn't do.

Forcing his mount to the very limit of its speed, Red Curnan pulled in alongside him.

"Where in the hell you goin', Dan?" he hollered, angrily. "What's the idea?"

"I'm going back for my wife, Red!"

"You can't do that, yuh fool! The valley men are waitin' there fer yuh. Yore dad is dyin' . . . mebbyso dead. You can't take that . . . that damn Dawson back among them folks. They won't take kindly to it, I'll tell yuh that. Let her go. None of 'em are any good. . . ."

As he spoke, he reached out for Dan's rein, as if to restrain him. And Dan struck, with a mirthless laugh upon his lips. He swung his right fist to the point of Red's jaw, with every ounce of his hundred and eighty pounds behind it. Red's head snapped back. He weaved in the saddle, clutched desperately at the peg. Then, as his senses wavered, lost his balance and toppled to the ground.

Dan never slackened his pace. He liked Red and could make allowances for his zealous loyalty. He hoped the kid wasn't badly hurt, but couldn't take time to make sure. He had told them all that he would fight . . . for what he wanted. And now, more than ever before, he knew it was Gail he wanted most out of all of this turmoil. Red too must know that now.

ONCE again he came loping into Stirrup. It was getting late and all but the larger saloons were closed. The townsmen no longer loitered in groups upon the walks. The place was quiet. Dan raced to the parsonage, lit down at the rack, stood numbed with loneliness and despair. All lights were out in the preacher's modest little home. Neither Gail nor her pony were in evidence.

For bitter moments, he was prey to

poignant self-recriminations. He had failed. In one moment of blinding emotion, he had lost the girl he had just married.

"Gail!" he cried to the night. "Gail! Where can I hope to find you?"

Somewhere nearby, a horse nickered. Dan's own mount answered. Then Gail was walking toward him; leading her pony out of the gloomy shadows of a cottonwood clump. Her calm, unhurried walk breathed of strength, yet there was something almost pitiful in her silent, white-faced stare. Her eyes were hard, her chin level. She was obviously hurt, as she had never been hurt before. And the knowledge stung Dan like a wound. He yearned to cry out that he had failed her, that the fever of his momentary blood call was allayed. He yearned to get down on his knees to her and plead for forgiveness. But he couldn't. He moved slowly to meet her, surprised at the sudden calm within him. Now they stood face to face.

"I . . . I guess I got buck fever, honey," he apologized. "When I found you wasn't along, I was scairt you'd gone home."

"Home?" a tight little laugh escaped her. "I guess I . . . I haven't any home, Dan. I guess you don't understand the Dawsons. I can just hear my father saying that I've made my bed with the Stocktons and I can lie in it. So, when the Stockton I married went away without me, I . . . I just went into the trees to try to think things out."

Dan choked, feeling totally impotent to comfort her. Beside his own troubles, beside the compounded troubles of Stirrup Basin, the bedeviling plight of this sad-eyed girl was brutally overshadowing.

"Why didn't you follow along, Gail?" he asked, tenderly.

"It needed more courage than I had," she confessed. "The valley men will be at the Sleeping S. Ugly tempered and hating all Dawsons. With your father to look after, you would have to leave me much alone with them. I'm afraid, Dan—afraid that we're being drawn into this trouble we vowed to ride away from."

Dan nodded soberly. He understood how she felt about going out to the Sleeping S, knew his own courage would have failed him had the situation been reversed. He too felt a certain fear that they were becoming entangled in this thing they both hated, but cast it off in the knowledge that, for him at least, there was now no running away from it. He threw a comforting arm about her shoulders.

"Don't worry, Gail," he said softly. "If we're drawed into this crazy scrap, it'll be only to stop it. When we talked about goin' away, my dad was whole an' hearty. But now . . . ."

"I understand," she sighed. "You'll have to go to him."

"We'll have to go to him," he corrected. "Up you go! We're riding to the Sleeping S, you an' me. There's so very much fer us both tuh do . . . an' so little time tuh do it."

Unresisting, she allowed him to boost her into the saddle. Stirrup to stirrup, they loped away to the west—the girl's quiet acceptance of an unsavory situation lifting Dan's courage for what lay ahead.

THE lights of the Sleeping S winked cheerily through the trees. There were many ponies at the racks—all top ponies with saddles cinched up and carbines in the boots. Sheriff Sam Gillig's blue roan and the personal horses of a dozen powerful valley cattlemen were there.

The porch was lined with armed men, who ceased their talk and stared silently as Dan reined in before the door, helped Gail to alight and led her into the house. The big living room was filled with men, their eyes hard, their faces drawn with emotion. Dan felt the impact of their

unfriendliness, nodded bleakly as his eyes ran over the gathering. There was gaunt Sheriff Gillig, Chet Hammond of the Walking H, squat Bart Swallow of the Big S, and others. Hard men, every one, they were hard as the native rock, and as unyielding. Dan's eyes came to rest on the bleak face of the sheriff.

"Hello, Sam," he said tonelessly. "Is dad. . . .?"

"He's back yonder, in bed," motioned the lawman. "Hard hit an' askin' for you. We expected you sooner. . . ." His eyes fell upon Gail condemningly.

Dan flushed, hot words leaping to his tongue. Checking them, he took the girl's arm, guided her into the long hall giving off the living room. Ahead of them, a spearhead of light stabbed through a partly opened door. The air was heavy with antiseptics and from within the bedroom drifted the soft murmur of muted voices. Gail disengaged Dan's fingers, stopped abruptly.

"I'll stay here, Dan," she said, firmly. "No use hurting him unnecessarily. You go in and see him alone."

Dan would have argued the point, but read determination in her eyes. He nodded, patted her arm and walked into the sick room. At one side of the bed, looking more buzzard-like than a buzzard, sat Gabe Ganton, the lawyer. Standing at the foot of the bed, rubbing a swollen jaw, stood Red Curnan. The bearded medico, his fingers on the stricken man's pulse, lifted his eyes, glanced at his watch, nodded and rose.

"Hello, Dan," he murmured. "I'm glad you came. Your father is a very sick man. Try not to excite him. Make your talk brief and then all of you get out and let him get some rest."

Dan nodded, moved to the bed. Hub Stockton, breathing heavily, lay upon his back, his eyes closed, his face drawn with pain. As Dan's fingers smoothed back the stiff gray hair from his father's brow, the wounded cowman opened his bloodshot eyes. The ghost of a smile worked about his lips.

"I'm done, son," he murmured, fatalistically. "Hit low. Bullet drawed a line acrost my hip bones, bustin' 'em both. No. . . . I know what you're gonna say, Dan, but don't say it. I know when I've drawed my ticket. I know also that you don't want no part uh this war. Neither did I. But they've handed it to us on a silver platter that's too hot to hold. You gotta go through with it, son, fer my sake —an' fer the Sleepin' S, despite this Dawson gal that Red says you've married. I'm sorry yuh done that, Dan. Where at is she?"

"She's out in the hall, dad!"

"Humph! Had the gall tuh fetch her home, eh? Bring her in here! I want tuh talk to her."

Dan hesitated, his eyes swinging about the room. The medico shook his head with sombre resignation. Red rubbed his sore jaw, hung his head. Gabe Ganton hid his mouth behind his hand as he muffled a cough; but his eyes were hotly gloating. Deeply troubled, Dan turned, left the room, went to the disconsolate girl.

"Come on in, honey," he invited. "He wants to talk to you. I'll be with you, so don't be afraid."

"I won't," she promised. "He couldn't harm me, even if he was well an' strong. I'm not afraid of anything . . . except us."

DAN took her hand, led her in to face his father. Old Hub Stockton stared at her with strange intensity.

"You ran away from yore own kin," he said, wonderingly, "tuh marry one uh the men they're fightin'. Why?"

"Because I love him!" she returned, proudly.

"Love . . . humph! All right. That leaves

you a Dawson, doubtless, but what the hell does it make Dan?"

"It makes him my husband," the girl said with spirit. "That's all that counts with me."

"That ain't what counts down here," Hub countered, belligerently. "From all the sign, it bids fair tuh make him a Dawson too. This shootin' has inflamed the valley. Men are talkin' a war of extermination ag'in' them that are startin' a unprovoked ruckus."

"Unprovoked?" Her voice lifted angrily. "How can you say such a thing, Mister Stockton? I won't believe there's a man among my people who would do this to you. But if they did, it was only retaliation for what the valley men did to them yesterday. . . ."

"Yesterday?" Hub Stockton's eyes flashed. "Meanin' what?"

"Should I have to explain?" she asked, wearily. "Yesterday at the dam, two men attacked the boys working there. One of my cousins was killed, another badly wounded. He was shot from the brush. There was a chase, but the two gunmen escaped in the timber of Apache Creek. . . ."

"Gail!" cried Dan, aghast. "What are you saying? Why didn't you tell me?"

She faced him, with trembling lips. "Because I was afraid for you, Dan. We had agreed that no matter what happened, we wouldn't let it affect us. I swallowed my hurt and my family pride to keep that agreement. I was afraid of what you might do if I told you. But please—" her eyes again sought those of the suffering man on the bad—"please don't talk like all the blame lies up on yonder mesa."

Old Hub bridled. "I don't believe yuh!" he growled, brutally. "I can't. You must be lyin' tuh cover up what yore kinsmen done here tonight. . . ."

"That'll be enough uh that, dad," reproved Dan, coldly. "Gail's not lyin'. The Dawsons run the two men who done that shootin' at the dam. They must know what kind of ponies they was forkin' an' somethin' uh how they looked. Before I'm done with it, I'll have a mighty good idea who they were. An' when I do. . . ."

He straightened, his mouth a grim line. His eyes flicked to Gabe Ganton. The gloating was gone from Gabe's eyes now, replaced by an icy and threatening chill.

"Young man," Ganton said venomously, "One cannot play with a skunk without getting smelled up. By your fraternizing with the Dawson clan, you have sacrificed the respect and confidence of every man in this valley. I don't advise you to make any idle threats, or to do any personal prying into corners where you are unwelcome. Right now it may be more dangerous to know too much, than not enough."

Old Hub Stockton started, tried to lift himself around to stare at the frigidly talking shyster. A spasm caught him and he slumped back, groaning. The medico stepped forward.

"I warned you men," he snapped, "not to excite him. Get out of here . . . and stay out!"

Fired by the lawyer's threat, Dan started toward the man as he rose. Then he felt Gail's hand upon his arm. It calmed him. With seething thoughts and half slitted eyes, he watched the man stalk stiffly from the room, watched until Red Curnan had followed him. Then, taking Gail by the hand, he led her out into the smoke atmosphere of the great living room, a-buzz now with the subdued murmur of aroused warriors.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bushwhacker Toll

DAN'S entry into the crowded living room of the Sleeping S, with Gail on his arm, was a signal for another em-

barrassing pause. It filled Dan with rage, yet that anger was tempered with a dreadful feeling of impotence. He believed he understood: Gail was a Dawson; these rough valley men were by their silence refusing to accept her as a Stockton.

He felt the girl's fingers tighten spasmodically on his arm, and, to spare her, he passed straight through the clustered warriors and out the front door. On the porch, beneath a verdant arch of vines, they sat down, holding close to each other as if, in the beat of the other's heart, each found comfort and the courage to face the bleak outlook.

"It's me," Gail murmured bitterly. "They won't have me, Dan. And if you don't admit it, they'll have none of you. They will make it terribly difficult for you if you try to keep me here."

"I'll stand just so much uh that kinda thing," retorted Dan. "Then I'll tell 'em somethin' in a lingo they'll understand. They can't. . . ."

He clipped off his words, hearkening to the lifting beat of hoofs through the night. The girl shrank against him, half fearfully. As the sound grew in volume, the drone of voices in the room subsided, stopped. A horse rocketed out of the brushlands, reared as the rider curbed cruelly and quit the saddle. A man came running toward the house, his spurs singing, his voice uplifted in a breathless paen of hate. . . .

"Tally one!" he bawled, stridently. "He come coyotein' down the trail an' I let moonlight through him!"

He hit the porch, crossed it in a bound, his voice lost in the frenzied roar of approving men. A stricken cry broke from Gail as she buried her face on Dan's breast.

"Another!" she moaned. "And you're talking about telling it to 'em in a lingo they'll understand. What good will that do? We must do something to stop this slaughter from the brush. There's no reason for men to die this way."

"Steddy, Gail!" Dan tilted up her chin to look into her eyes. "Keep a tight rein on yore nerves, honey. This ain't yore war an' it ain't mine. It's started an' we can't stop it by wishin'. But when the sign's right, I'll do what I can. . . ."

His words tailed out in a weird silence that had suddenly gripped the ranch house. From the living room came the soft flutter of a closing door. The solemn voice of the doctor struck through the stillness.

"I am sorry to inform you, gentlemen, that Hub Stockton is dead!"

"Dead!" With a whisper of awe, Dan came to his feet. He took a step toward the door, paused as if loath to face the low and ugly murmur lifting from the assembled men. Standing there with the light from a window revealing the stiff grimness of him, he seemed suddenly older, more austere. Watching him, Gail clasped her hands at her breast, and her lips moved as if in prayer.

Dan was still standing in that fatefully lighted spot, when his brain seemed to explode in a blinding flash of fire. Strength poured out of him and he groped with his hands for balance and support. He was falling and, as if from a far distance, he caught the angry snarl of a gun, the irate growl of running men. The ground rose up to meet him. Guns were blasting. Gail was weeping over him, brokenly, hysterically. The reprisal for the mesa man slain on valley trails hadn't been long in coming. With his last moment of consciousness, Dan thought cynically upon the twist of fate that he, perhaps the only man in Stirrup Basin opposed to war, had been sacrificed upon the altar of hate. . . .

THE men were rushing back from a fruitless search for the bushwhacker. Strong hands were lifting Dan up, car-

rying him back into a bedroom. Gail clawed her way through the press to stay beside the man she had married. The valley men were cursing, bitter, their nerves rubbed raw. Venting their profane spleen, careless that there was a woman present. But Gail took no notice. It was not her first experience with rough men gone bronc. She had witnessed much the same thing on the mesa the day before, when the Dawsons had fetched back the two victims of the bushwhacking at the dam.

Now they were laying Dan out on the bed. Gail knelt beside him, sobbing, begging him to open his eyes. The men pressed in, threatening to crush her. The doctor came squirming through with his bag, begging for more room and fresh air for Dan. Gail bounced up, white faced and on the fight.

"Get out of here, every one of you!" she cried, wrathfully. "He wanted none of this. It's your fault that he's . . . he's like he is. And now, you're trying to cheat him of what little chance he's got. Get out of here an' let him be!"

"An' leave you with him?" It was Gabe Ganton's taunt striking out of the awed gathering. "A Dawson? Huh, that would be good, wouldn't it? How do we know you didn't entice him out on the porch where one of your precious murderers could get a fair shot at him? Leave you alone with him, so you can finish the foul work your kinsmen have started. You'll go with us!"

"Well, for God's sake, go!" commanded the medico. "The man's shot! Give me a chance to attend him."

At Ganton's order, they commenced pouring from the room. Rough hands reached out for Gail, carried her struggling to the living room. Men were milling about the sheriff, crying for reprisals. Unspeakable names were tagged to the mesa Texans that shot from the brush. And, among the loudest voices uplifted against such practices, was that of the youngster who, only a few minutes before, had arrived boasting of an ambush murder.

Hot resentment flamed through Gail. These were the men who wouldn't let her be a Stockton, who more than half believed she was guilty of the attempted murder of the man she had just married. She found her hate rising swiftly to match theirs. And a flood of words, long restrained, burst from her in a scathing tide.

"What are you doing about these killings, Sheriff Gillig?" she cried. "Why are you hanging around here, drooling cheap talk, while men are dying? While men are stalking others through the brush?" Her words tumbled over each other, savagely condemning.

"You're a woman, ma'am," replied the lawman, stiffly. "You wouldn't understand."

"I am a woman!" Contempt sprang into every curve of her lithe young body. "And I understand a lot of things. Two of my own people have been killed and another wounded. Hub Stockton is dead and his son, my husband, lies in there dangerously hurt. One of your men—" she leveled a finger at the latest arrival —"rides in boasting of drygulching one of the Texans. You make him a hero. By your sacred oath, you should arrest him. I understand only too well. These are the men who elected you. They're only votes to you, or to any other lawman too yellow to go against their will and do his duty!"

Sam Gillig trembled under the lash of her tongue. A nervously chewed cigar was ground to bits in his twitching fingers.

"Yellow, eh?" he sneered. "Who are you to call a man yellow? You who quit your own folks to escape the fate that's

shorely comin' tuh such savages! You who throwed yoreself at the head of Dan Stockton, tuh weaken his will an' shame him before them as was his friends. Nope, I wouldn't holler about yellow, if I was you."

Gail stood stunned. This then was what old Hub Stockton had feared. The warped minds of these cowmen were able to attribute almost any motive to her marrying Dan, except the right one. And these things would persist long after the gun echoes had died and after the last gunsmoke had blown away. Folks would point her out as sort of a female Judas. Heartaches and the bitter memory of murdered kinfolks would dim in the march of time. But tags have a way of living forever. . . .

Tears came to Gail's eyes. Hot tears she couldn't control. The deeds of these two warring factions she could steel herself against. But how could she fight the injustice of this prison of condemnation they were rearing about her? A sob broke from her. Now, more than ever before, she needed Dan. Dead or alive, she needed him. With a choking cry, she darted toward the hall door, halted as it opened. Dan Stockton stood there, white and grim and coldly sneering. His eyes were not for Gail. They were fixed with rancorous intensity upon Sheriff Sam Gillig.

"Sheriff," he said, tensely, "I heard what you just said. It brands you as a cowardly liar an' a dirty dog. Instead uh bein' interested in stoppin' this lawlessness, yo're openly abettin' it. Why? There's a answer to that an' it's poisoned with greed. Somewhere in this ugly business there's an axe tuh grind. Mebby yo're the feller that's aimin' tuh profit by it. I aim tuh find out. If so, yo're not fightin' only the Dawsons. Yo're fightin' the Sleepin' S, that I'm runnin' my way from here out. . . ."

HE reeled dizzily, raised his hand to the bloody bandage around his head. Behind him, the doctor steadied him, warned him against any undue excitement. Gail was laughing and crying all in one. The death of Dan's father, the shot from the dark, the sordid savagery of those with whom he was associated, all these things seemed to have crystalized his manhood. His partisanship now was definitely for the Sleeping S, for himself . . . and for her. Pride and joy and a blinding thankfulness swept through her in a storm of emotion. Dan was droning on, leaning against the door jamb for support.

"You talk fight! You talked it so strong to my dad that he believed you and was willing to lead you. Now he's dead. You'll be looking elsewhere for leadership. Well . . . don't look to me. The man that's leadin' this slaughter will hang . . . if he lives that long. I want no part of it. From now on, I've got a spread to look after . . . and a wife. Any fightin' I do will be for them. If you've got half the leather in yore soul that this little woman has, you'll get right. If not. . . ."

"Hold on, Stockton!" Lawyer Gabe Ganton held up a gaunt hand. "Aren't you going a bit too far. The sheriff and the rest of us are only looking after the rights of this valley. Your rights as well as others. We were friends to your father, just as we'll be your friends if you let us. . . ."

"Which I won't," snapped Dan. "I want no part uh friends that turn wolf to feather some human polecat's nest. I'll go it alone, lookin' fer sign of him that's responsible fer this—" he touched the bloody bandage— "an' responsible fer what lies in yonder bedroom. Until you come to yore senses, tuh hell with yuh all. Go fight yore war, but don't look at me."

"We can't be expected tuh admire that

kinda talk from you, Dan," reproved grizzled Chet Hammond, of the Walking H.

"I don't expect yuh to," rumbled Dan. "An' don't care if you do or not. If yuh don't like it, get off the Sleepin' S. I ain't warrin' fer something I don't want, even if I have got more cause fer goin' tuh war than the rest of yuh. I've paid fer even bein' knowed as one of yuh. Fight yore own fight, an' take what comes to yuh without hollerin'!"

Gail hardly knew the Dan Stockton who snarled defiance at the valley warriors. He was deeper, stronger, more determined—standing head and shoulders above the rest of the pack. Men were scowling at him, muttering angrily as they edged toward the door. Ugly talk rose and fell, but Dan only glared at them with undisguised intolerance.

The Sleeping S cowhands drifted outside with the rest, sullen and resentful. Horses whirled from the racks and thundered away. The wheels of a buckboard ground down the lane toward the gate. Men left by twos and threes, cursing spitefully. Only the gray haired, gentle-eyed doctor stayed behind. Unobtrusively, he stood in the hallway door to watch Dan walk to Gail, press her to him and bury his face in her hair.

"That was a fine thing you did, Dan," murmured the little medico. "When almost every human instinct must have been deviling you to join them in the awful thing they are preparing to do. You were all alone, but you stood up to them with the same manhood I have always admired in your father. It made me proud to be known as your friend."

Dan smiled his thanks. "Alone," he said tenderly, "I couldn't have done it, Doc. Without Gail, I would be only half a man."

The medico smiled, walked to them. His hands went out to them, one to the shoulder of each, as he looked into their eyes. Though he didn't speak, that look was like a benediction, like a blessing for their future. Doc Crandall had lived very, very close to death all these years, fighting the Grim Reaper, rather than catering to his whims. That's why, among all the men in the valley, he alone could sympathize with the stand of these two youngsters.

Now he nodded, picked up his bag and left. When he had gone, Dan led Gail back into the room where all that was mortal of Hub Stockton lay. Hand in hand, they stood looking down at him, dry-eyed and silent. Stirrup Basin had lost a staunch friend. For every dollar Hub Stockton had banked or turned back into the Sleeping S, another had gone to allay some neighbor's suffering, to recoup some fellow cowman's failure, to fetch happiness to someone's troubled heart. In return he had demanded loyalty to the cattle business, to Stirrup Basin . . . . and to him. A stubborn man, a kindly and honest man, a strong man had passed. And, though Gail's fingers were about his arm, Dan felt a pang of loneliness. In Old Hub's passing Dan had lost something that even she could not replace.

VERY gently, Dan drew the sheet over his sire's face and led Gail from the room. The house reeked with heat and smoke, so he continued straight on into the clean, cool night. Dan fashioned a smoke and they sat there, staring silently across the sweep of the rangeland, too full of its tragedies to find need for words.

Scant minutes had they sat there when hoofbeats roared from the corrals. The Sleeping S hands came loping about the corner of the house, each with his warbag lashed to his cantle. Now they reined to a stop. Red Curnan lit down and rattled up to Dan.

"We're lightin' a shuck, feller," he

announced, without preamble. "Me an' the boys is plumb fed up with this chicken yard outfit!"

He stood spraddle-legged and belligerent, as if daring Dan to speak his mind. But Dan was never more relaxed or clear thinking. He felt Gail stiffen at his side, knew she stared at the big gun that hung at Red's thigh. There was neither fear nor anger in Dan now. Some of these men had been with the Sleeping S for as long as he could remember, had grown gray and bent in the service. In the wan light of the breaking dawn, Dan could read pity for him in their eyes. With a few pleading words, he could have turned some of these from their purpose. But to beg was weakness, and Dan had determined to be strong, win or lose.

"All right, boys," he said, resignedly. "I'm glad yo're leavin' of yore own free will. The Sleepin' S can't use men that can't be loyal. I'll make out yore time."

He rose. But Red's sneer stopped him.

"We can't use yore money, feller. If we bought likker with it, we'd git sick to our stummicks. Someday you'll eat them words about us bein' unloyal. Yo're the one that's lettin' the outfit down. Gabe Ganton has got the cowmen tuh kick in on a pool tuh pay us. Tonight we're ridin' to the mesa tuh clean it up. Wipeout . . . . savvy? Doin' fer you what you ain't got guts tuh do yoreself."

Spitting, he turned away, flung astride and roared away with the rest of them. When the clatter of their going had faded into the wakening noises of the dawn, Gail rose to face the weary, dispirited man she had married.

"You are worn out," she said, maternally. "And need rest. You go to bed and I'll get back as soon as I can."

"Back?" Dan stared at her, puzzled. "What do you mean? Where you going?"

"Up on the mesa," she said, wearily. "To warn my people . . . ."

"But Gail . . . !" Dan's protest was anguished. "You can't go up there. You agreed that it ain't our fight. An' now . . . ."

"Now—" she finished, firmly, "I'm riding to do the very least any human being should do. I agreed to keep out of this trouble. But I didn't agree to stand by and see the blood of my people spilt without a chance. There's a line we must draw, Dan—a line we mustn't cross. For after all we've got to live with ourselves . . . ."

"There's two sides to this," countered Dan, stubbornly. "The Stocktons are no part of either side. If you ride up there today, you're a Dawson . . . . not a Stockton. An' you'll be in the war up to your neck. No . . . . you can't go."

For a long minute, Gail looked at him. Horror blended with the voiceless plea of her eyes. She could read no relenting in Dan's face. Only an iron-clad determination to stay by his decision. With a queer little hurt cry, she whirled away from him, darted to the stable to saddle her horse. Minutes later she swept past the porch, not daring to look back at him. Roweling toward the mesa where the black shadows of war lingered in the first pink promise of the sunrise.

"Then don't come back . . . ." he flung after her.

If Gail heard, she gave no sign. She rode with the swift and easy grace of the range-born woman. Rode to warn her own flesh and blood of approaching doom. Rode to take their sneers, and the blame for their trouble. Rode from the ashes of her once blind faith into the awful void of hopelessness . . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

The Traitor Comes Back

THAT morning was endless to Dan Stockton. He was engrossed in the

morbid business of digging a grave to bury Old Hub Stockton, and tortured with a loneliness far beyond anything he had ever dared conceive. But as he labored, as he suffered, he did what was perhaps the clearest thinking of his life. And in that kind of thinking lies man's salvation.

The grave was finished. Dan had shouldered the stiffened body of his sire, moved it to the fresh-dug hole and lowered it. Now, weakened from sleeplessness and his throbbing wounded head, Dan hunkered beside the grave to stare into the peaceful, hollow-eyed face of the dead. There were no tears, no lamentations, no eulogies—just a few soft-spoken, meaningful words, simple as the surroundings.

"Good bye, dad! Somewhere along the line you weakened, allowed 'em tuh fool yuh. You paid fer that . . . . high. They ain't gonna fool me so easy an' I'm bettin' the same price you paid on it. Good huntin', ol' friend, on the Shadow Range!"

Then he rolled in the clean valley earth. When his task was finished, he filled his lungs to dispel his drugging weariness, went to the house for meat and coffee to sustain his strength. When he came out of the house, at mid-afternoon, he paused a moment to take a longing look at this, the only home he had ever known. He smiled enigmatically as he remarked to himself that it might be his last look at it. And that smile still lingered upon his lips as he rode swiftly away from the Sleeping S. But in his cloudy gray eyes a bitter hardness slept.

OLD TIME cowmen still recall Dan's swift entry into the ranch yard of Chet Hammond's Walking H, rendezvous of the valley warriors delegated to carry death and destruction to the Dawsons. The yard teemed with fast horses and heavily armed men who bent brittly inquiring eyes upon this man who, for hours, had been the target of their abuse. Even the erstwhile Sleeping S hands, clustered in a little group by the corral fence, eyed his coming quizzically, as if questioning his motives in riding here.

As Dan lit down, Sheriff Gillig and Gabe Ganton moved out to meet him. Dan smiled with a mirthless twisting of the lips.

"H'are yuh, gents."

"Howdy, Dan," Sam Gillig's voice was gently reproving. "Yo're findin' us all a little tender from the rawhidin' you gave us last night. Seein' that we was on the Sleepin' S, you was mebbyso within' yore rights there. But—" he frowned blackly —"if you have come here tuh ladle out some more of the same . . . ."

"Don't worry!" Dan's eyes were averted as he slipped his cinch. "I was beside myself, gents. Havin' lost my dad an' nursin' a bullet brand the way I was. I hope you make out to forget what I said."

"Shore we can," Sheriff Gillig's tone was hearty and genuine. "Consider it as good as forgot. God knows, this business has hit you harder'n any of us. What's on yore mind, Dan?"

"Yo're ridin' to the mesa tonight, Sheriff?"

"You bet we are. Ridin' tuh put a end to the Stirrup Basin War. If I didn't think that this peace-makin' was a lawful an' worthwhile enterprise, Dan, I'd put a stop to it a-bornin'. Why do yuh ask, Dan?"

Dan twisted in mock uneasiness. "Certain things," he drawled enigmatically, "has gotta be done. I've done some heavy thinkin' since I saw you. Done some plain talkin' to my dad as I laid him to rest this mornin'. If you gents consider it fittin', I'd admire tuh have a hand in the

most important thing that ever happened in the Stirrup. Will you have me?"

The sheriff and the gaunt-eyed lawyer exchanged swift and startled glances. Ganton muffled a cough behind his hand.

"Men will die tonight, Stockton," he reminded, gravely. "We face a disagreeable but necessary task. The men we take along are being picked because they are brave and hard and committed to the best interests of this valley. Are you one of those? Can these men find assurance that the Dawson woman you married has not softened you beyond the point a man can go and still be . . . . a man?"

Dan's temper flamed. "Keep her off your tongue, Ganton!" he raged. "An' don't let me hear you mention her again. If I didn't think I was a better man than any you've got, I wouldn't uh rode here. I stand ready to prove it. You got a man here that thinks he can best me? Or two of 'em? If so, trot 'em out."

The lawyer didn't answer. He just smiled savagely, shot out his gaunt hand to take Dan's. That cold and clammy grip startled the young Sleeping S boss. It was as if he held a snake or a dead fish. He turned his head, lifted a triumphant croak.

"Attention, everybody!" And when they had closed in the circle around the three of them: "Boys, Dan Stockton has seen the error of his ways. He's asked us to forget what he said at the Sleeping S last night and begs to be allowed to accompany us to the mesa tonight. How about it? Do you want him along?"

"Yes!" they sang out. "Yes! Yes!"

"Knowed Ol' Hub's whelp would come out of it!"

When the enthusiastic comments had subsided, the lawyer touched his finger tips piously. "Gentlemen," he intoned, "in this boy's father, we lost a worthy leader. We cannot hope to adequately replace him. You gentlemen have very courteously invited me to lead you, which invitation I have had under consideration. That honor I am now forced to refuse. Dan Stockton has all of the same qualities of leadership possessed by his worthy father. He lacks only the steadying influence of age. We have plenty of that to go along with him. I give you Dan Stockton, gentlemen, as leader of the Stirrup Valley Pool!"

THE roar that lifted was deafening. It was a vociferous acknowledgement of the esteem in which these rough men had held the young ramrod of the Sleeping S, and of the joy with which they welcomed him back into their fold. Disbelieving his ears, Dan shot a swift look at Gabe Ganton. The man was flushed and smiling as he reacted to the acclaim. But in his deep-sunk eyes were shadows that no outward manifestation could dispel. The shadows of a mighty fear were slowly congealing into the smug plasma of an enormous content. The lawyer had his hand again; his voice was droning on.

"Young man, I congratulate you. And I congratulate the Pool. We now lack for nothing; long odds in man power; the advantage of surprise; a capable leader —and the sustaining knowledge that our cause is just and right. We leave here in time to hit the Dawsons at dawn. We leave our horses on this side of the Coyote Fork of Apache Creek, wade across and open on them from the east bank as they leave their cabins. If those who survive won't surrender and elect to fight, we'll soon wear them down by keeping them away from the water. What do you think of it?"

"Sounds iron clad," commented Dan, with just a touch of cynicism. "What about the women up there?"

The lawyer blinked, coughed. "The Dawsons," he drawled, with enormous unction, "should have thought of their

women before they started this trouble. We all feel sorry for them, of course. But we can't let them turn us from our duty. We have women down here, women who will suffer and be faced with starvation when the Dawsons have diverted the water from our lands. Nor must we forget that this will be nasty business and that the dead—" he let a spasm of bubbly coughing bend him over into pitiably deformity,— "tell no tales."

The inflamed war spirits of the listening men made itself manifest in a raucus roar of approval. Gabe Ganton had done his work well. That roar made it easy for Dan to mask his own feelings. It made him a little sick inside, added just a little more chill to the light of his smouldering eyes. Men crowded in to shake his hand. Dan murmured half-hearted nothings in return and, at last, when he got the chance, he withdrew to the shade of a nearby cottonwood, threw himself down and fell asleep.

Night was falling when he awoke, strengthened, refreshed. Food was being set out for the men and Dan ate heartily. The evening wore on as the men gathered about a leaping fire of cottonwood logs. They were hunkered there spinning yarns and reviewing all the morbid details of range wars that had gone before, while Ganton and the two cruel-eyed bodyguards who continually shadowed him egged them on. These were men addicted to action rather than deep thinking. They had been poisoned with the adroit preachments of a stronger and sharper mind.

A rig whirled in from Stirrup town, fetching a plentiful supply of ammunition and word that the town was backing them to the limit . . . . for the good of the cloying dives that each month reaped a rich harvest from these same warriors. Dan got some more sleep and, this time, it was Doc Crandall who woke him to put a new dressing on his skull crease. Doc, who had come out from town with a plentiful supply of bandage and antiseptic for the thing he could at least assuage, if not prevent.

The medico had little to say, and Dan thought he could detect an air of disappointment about the man as if he found Dan's being here obnoxious. A little past midnight, Gabe Ganton raised his voice. Dark shadows that were men rose and stretched. Half-smoked cigarettes arced through the gloom as the valley warriors moved to rig their ponies. From somewhere Red Curnan came out of the gloom, ill at ease and half ashamed.

"Want I should screw down the furniture on yore roan?" he asked Dan, hesitantly.

"Thanks Red," Dan's tone was as kindly as if there had never been doubt between them. "That'll be fine. An' while yo're doin' it, I wish you'd have the boys saddle Ganton's pony. Yeah . . . . an' them belongin' to his gunmen."

"Them . . . ?" Red's voice was mildly protestant. "What the hell fer? They ain't hobbled, are they? Besides, me an' the boys don't cotton much tuh them three. They're to bloodsweatin' fer much good. Their talkin' about beefin' wimmen the way they are don't set well with us. What's the idea of all the generosity?"

"I wanta be shore they go along, Red. If my hunch is right, they'll be ridin' somewhere farther from bullets than the mesa this night. Do what I tell yuh."

"Cripes . . . !" Red stared. "Yuh think . . . ?"

HE turned away to catch the rest of the one-time Sleeping S hands. One by one, the warriors found their saddles, rode to ring the blazing fire where Sheriff Gillig, Chet Hammond and Gabe Ganton stood. Now the lawyer held up a hand for silence.

"Boys," he said, fervently, "it's time

to take the step. You're strong in numbers and armed for war. You will be sustained by the knowledge that you're fighting for the right to survive. If you fail, we'll all walk out of the upper valley, leaving it for the Dawsons. Your cause is just. Nothing you do up there will ever rowel your conscience. You can not lose. You must not lose. Good bye, good luck and God bless you every one!"

A shout of acknowledgement went up as Ganton shook hands with Gillig and Hammond and boosted them playfully into their saddles. As the clamor subsided, Dan swung down from his horse, clanked up to face the lawyer. A strange silence fell over the mounted gathering. Ganton smiled patronizingly, extended his bony hand.

"Best of luck, Stockton," he cried. "It is in your hands. The men have confidence in you. I don't need to tell you that the valley looks to you as its savior."

"No!" Dan's voice rang like a clapper against a bell. "You don't need to tell me that, Ganton. An' you needn't expect to get away with it. I came to you today like an act of God, didn't I? I came an' saved you showin' yore yellow streak to these men, didn't I? Made it possible fer you to . . . ."

"Please, Stockton . . . . please," begged the shyster. "Time is getting short. You must understand how important it is to cross Coyote Creek before daylight. Talk won't get us anywhere now. Come on. Get going."

"Talk . . . ," contradicted Dan, "has done all the harm it can, Ganton. An' why are we in more of a hurry than you are. Anytime you're ready, we'll all leave."

"But—" the man started, then bent over in his habitual cough of sympathy. "But I'm not going, Stockton. I'm an invalid. I've far exceeded my strength during these last few days, as you all know. I feel very weak. My cough is much worse. Pray God I had more strength. I've done all I can."

"Mebbyso," gritted Dan. "But you haven't done all yo're goin' to." He turned his head. "Red . . . . fetch up them three ponies!"

And when the horses were led forward, while Ganton eyed them with almost fearful fascination, Dan's voice crackled through the stillness.

"Now, Ganton, climb up into this saddle. You've talked yoreself up a fine war. Now we'll all give a look at what kind of a war you fight. Get up!"

"Just a minute, smart feller!" Shoulder to shoulder, matching strides, the two gunman-bodyguards came sliding out of the shadows. Their heads poised above the butts of their guns. "You can't git away with this."

The spokesman fell silent, his eyes starting, his mouth falling open. With a lightning-like movement, Dan had drawn, was smiling coldly now as he swung the nose of his Colt's over the two of them and their buzzard-like boss.

"The same goes fer you boys! Take yore hands away from them guns an' straddle. You too, Ganton. You're gonna find out what war is. Even if I have tuh drive yuh into it with the snout of a .45. Move!"

Gabe Ganton's harrassed eyes ran along the rank of the silently staring mounted men. Some of them showed sympathy for him, all showed a certain measure of loyalty for the stand he had taken in their behalf. But in the eyes of no one of them could he detect the slightest condolence of his staying out of the fight he had so ably promoted. Slowly he turned his gaunt eyes upon his two startled gunmen, nodded sullenly. The three of them swung into their saddles, turned their stony faces to the moon rising over the heights of the Apache peaks. With a

roar, the cavalcade got away, every eye among the cowmen fixed on Dan who rode behind the lawyer and his two bodyguards, his hand upon his gun. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Battle of Painted Mesa

THE endless *cloppity-clop* of hoofs. Dust pluming up to mingle with the moon fog. The chuff of saddle leather. An occasional low word from one of the riders. Deliberately, the warriors of the Valley Pool swept across the brushland toward a breach in the headland that would permit of access to the mesa without resort to guarded trails.

Not once did Dan abate his vigilance. Not once did he relax and take his eyes from those three he rode behind. Two of them he knew to be killers. He wasn't sure of the third. Time alone would tell.

That they were riding into a gun-flame inferno, he well knew. Death would meet them somewhere on yonder mesa. It would likely come as a surprise . . . . with the surprisers getting surprised. And in that thought there was nothing of terror for Dan. Indeed, he somehow welcomed it. A gunshot grave had once held a horror for him. But that day was gone. His dreams of accomplishment on the Sleeping S were dead. The spread itself was lonely as a graveyard and rodded by a dead man. The prospect of picking up the shattered fragments of those dead dreams was not alluring. No, death would not be so hard to take, if in dying he could unmask the man who had done this thing to a peaceful, happy land.

His eyes, reaching far beyond the three bobbing forms ahead of him, caught the sweep of the valley, pale and beautiful in the moon rays. Here was a fair and fertile land, enriched by the blood and sweat of brave and daring men, by colorful men, who had started a new page of history . . . . and come mighty close to finishing it.

Weighing those men, of whom his father had been one, Dan wondered if he measured up, if, because he had refused to fight as they had fought, he was one of a thinner-skinned breed. The thought angered him. No. He would fight, gladly, fiercely, for the things he wanted, for the things that were right. He would go to his death with a smile on his lips. . . .

But even as he admitted that cheering thought, a torturing doubt gave it pause. Though in his blind stubborness he had banned Gail Dawson from his life by this latest move, he knew as he had known all along that he wanted her above all other things. Then why was he not fighting at her side? Why was he not protecting her from these inflamed aggressors?

It was a puzzling thing that left him utterly unable to work it out in his mind or in his actions. In that bitter, perplexing moment, it seemed to Dan that men could be nothing but puppets in the hands of an unconfiding Power. That perhaps men were fated to puzzle and hate and fight . . . . and die. He looked back on that not-so-long-ago night when he had topped the mesa and looked back at the lights of the Sleeping S and realized with sudden humility of spirit that it is not given to man to fully dictate his own destiny. Henceforth, if he lived over this night, he could never smile quite so easily. He would become graver, grimmer, more intent upon brushing aside life's ugliness to get at the frail savor of happiness.

War! Pain! Death! For what?

There had always been wars. To Dan, the thin ground fog settling into the rugged barranca heads was the ghostly smoke of old conflicts that had fired the blood of frontiersmen, whose appetites were easily whetted for war. Those men's code had been, and still was, to right their wrongs with guns. It had happened

before. It would happen again . . . .

Now the cavalcade swept into the dark maw of a barranca that cut the mesa like a fault. Stringing out into a thinner line, the pony's hoofs muted in the sandy bottom. Gradually the way tipped upward, emerging at last into the willow-lined trough of a barely trickling wash. They were close now to their goal, and Gabe Ganton called a halt.

"We'll fan out," he said, "ride to Coyote Fork, cross the stream and wait under the bank until they start coming out of their dens. We'll need to hurry. I estimate we've about fifteen minutes before dawn."

No one answered him. Silently, men headed down the wash. Dan walking his horse behind the lawyer and his two satellites. Red and the Sleeping S men followed closely, as if they, too, felt some of their boss's antagonism to the lawyer. The eastern sky was brightening as they reached the west bank of purling Coyote Fork. The song of the water across the stones muffled the plash of hoofs as the valley warriors started across.

ON the far side, a hundred feet perhaps from the east bank, the cabins of the Texans loomed starkly against the daybreak. Not a light showed. Neither in sight nor in sound was there a threat indicated. Dan swung his arm and the spread line of men moved across the knee-deep flow. Tense and alert, he was thrilling to the nearness of lethal combat, just as man has thrilled to the same since the dawn of time. These men had put all softness behind them and now rode with savagery. The light glinted from blued steel barrels and from somewhere came the eerie click of cocking gun.

Dan herded the lawyer and his bodyguards before him, chuckling at their hesitancy. Ganton's teeth were chattering audibly. Red Curnan, at Dan's stirrup, muttered as if to himself.

"It'll be easy. We've got 'em hipped . . . . ketched short. It won't take long."

It wouldn't take long. And Dan wondered how many of them would be alive to see the end. He wondered about Gail—if she would hate his memory, when she found he had been one of the attackers. And he wished suddenly that he had followed his first hunch and had taken Gail away from all of this to some far range where trouble could have passed them by, where their love could have bloomed instead of withering.

He felt the pull of the water at his boots as his horse went deeper, cursed it for being the unwitting cause of this murder. He glanced down the line. His men were past the middle of the stream. Some were crouched, ready, dangerously primed. Others walked with the nerveless calm of men certain of the result.

Then, from the willow fringe at the east bank, a hoarse order rang startlingly. Leaden death sent its red tongue licking at the invaders. Bullets, like hornets, whined and droned across the flow. Horses screamed, went down thrashing. Men were smashed from their saddles. And in the growing light riderless horses plunged wildly in the crimson-tinted water.

Dan's horse went down kicking, and with lead clutching at him with plucking fingers, Dan crouched in the thigh-deep water and tried to run for the protection of the east flood bank. Valley guns were smoking now as the warriors recovered from the first crushing shock of the ambush. And the Texans, far outnumbered, were giving back toward their buildings. One by one, those in the stream lunged through that holocaust of bullets and flopped from their mounts under the shelter of the bank. Dragging their wounded with them, the Texans made cover, their guns holding back any pos-

sible movement of the valley men. It was checkmate.

Screaming curses, Gabe Ganton and his two gunmen made it to the bank, the two bodyguards hurling lead at the retreating Texans, Ganton sobbing and shivering as he knelt behind cover. Dan, whose gun was still in the holster, hunkered under the bank, wiped at a trickle of blood from a bullet-nicked neck as he took stock. Four of the Valley Pool were lying yonder in the water, face down, with the current tugging at their resistless bodies. One of the Dawsons lay dead before the cabins. Firing had subsided to an occasional fitful sniping burst.

The sun came up, bright and hot. Neither side could hope now to accomplish much. Nor could either side do much to help themselves. It was suicide for the valley men to attempt to recross the stream. The Dawsons were prisoners in their cabins.

There was no talk. Dan hugged the bank for its meagre shade as the sun rolled higher. Gabe Ganton, his shaken nerves somewhat steadied, had joined his two gunmen now in throwing an occasional shot at the log buildings. Even that grew old after a time, and they gave themselves over to glaring at the Sleeping S boss.

It must have been noon when a murmuring at the north end of the valley line drew Dan's gaze. Men were gesticulating down there and, before Dan could divine their meaning, Red Curnan cried out at Dan's side. Dan flung himself about in time to see Gabe Ganton level his six shooter over the bank parapet. The man's deep-sunk eyes were aglow; his face was fiercely savage.

A quick flung glance showed Dan a movement beyond the most northerly of the houses. A woman was running out of the depression north of the house, running from the spring with a pail of water slopping in her grasp. It was Gail!

WITH a stricken cry, born of the knowledge that he was too late, Dan found his feet, hurled himself across the few scant yards at Ganton. The man's weapon exploded a split second before Dan lit upon him. The slug smashing into that swinging bucket and tearing it from the girl's hand. Ready Texan lead came screaming across the parapet as Dan showed himself—and missed him only by inches due to the speed of his leap.

The girl, quite unharmed, made the house in safety. And Gabe Ganton, struggling and screaming curses, tore away from Dan's grasp.

"Damn yore traitor soul tuh hell!" he raged. "You ain't fired a shot today. An' now you keep me from downin' that Dawson harpy that give us away. No wonder they were ready for us. You and her tipped them off. . . ."

Smashing his open hand against the man's mouth, Dan stemmed the tirade. He dropped his hand to his gun as the two bodyguards swung snarlingly toward him. The valley men were edging toward them, drawn by the internal strife they had more than half expected before this. But Red Curnan's warning howl gave them pause.

"One uh the Texicans is wavin' a white flag. They wanta make some wau-wau."

It was true. The last of the firing tailed out. The door of the largest house opened. A man stood forth, a bearded, lance-straight patriarch. Dan stood up to face Boone Dawson, an act that drew a roar of rage from the men behind the cabin walls. But the voice of the old Texan betrayed neither fear nor anger. His was a fervent plea meant for the ears of human beings.

"We've got wounded men in here an' no water to give 'em. I'm askin' you men

fer the right tuh fetch water from the stream. Beyond that, I ask nothin'."

"To hell with you!" shrieked Gabe Ganton, rearing his great height into view. "You asked for this scrap an' we're giving it to you. You ask us for water now so you can make us beg for water later!"

Boone Dawson started. His eyes narrowed. "What kind of a man are you, Ganton?" he bawled angrily. "I'm not beggin' water fer our fighters, but only fer the wimmen an' them that are sufferin'. There'll never be a time you men will have to beg from us. The Apache Crick carries water enough fer us all. But because we aim to put that water to work instead uh lettin' it waste in the sea, you shoot down my boys an' fetch yore fighters to our homes like slinkin' beasts in the night."

One by one, the valley men were standing up to take part in the palaver. Powder-grimed faces showed at the cabin windows and at half-opened doors. From some of the buildings came the choked sobbings of hysterical women. Behind the quivering leader of the Texans, Gail Dawson stepped out to stand proudly beside her sire. And her eyes were fixed with cool steadiness upon the man she had married.

Something in her stare sent a pang through Dan. These brave women and leather-souled men were fighting for the right to make a home on this mesa. Other men were disputing that right—to protect what was already theirs in the valley. Courage and leather and lead. Men dying on both sides. Men begging for water! But they did not want rivers of it, now, but only the few precious drops to relieve the fever of gunshot wounds. Dan's voice rang out.

"Boone Dawson," he cried, "there's not a man among us who hones tuh keep water from yore wounded and yore wimmen. Nor is there a man here who would deny you the right tuh use the water that we valley folks waste. But, likewise, there's not a man here but will fight till yo're wiped out tuh prevent yore bushwhackers slidin' into the valley to murder our men in their own dooryards . . . ."

"Bushwhackers!" Boone Dawson's retort was a snarl. "That's a fightin' word, Stockton. If there was a bushwacker in the whole Dawson tribe, I'd kill him with my own hand. Until now, the only shots fired at one of you by my boys was at the dam. An' that was after yore hellers had killed one of us an' wounded another . . . . from the brush."

"Which one of you killed my father through a window of his own house?" demanded Dan, relentlessly. "Last night?"

"Not a Dawson left the place last night," countered the patriarch. "I swear it! I'm sorry tuh hear about Hub Stockton, but we had nothing to do with his death. The responsibility fer this whole trouble lies with you. We've never downed a valley man until right now. Knowin' we was tryin' to irrigate the mesa, you even sent a man tuh Santa Fe tuh file on the water supply an' . . . ."

". . . . an' failed!" finished Dan. "Because you had filed on the whole surface flow of Apache Crick first. Through yore agent—Horatio Brown."

"That's a lie!" raged Boone Dawson, leveling a long index finger. "For there's Horatio Brown standin' beside Ganton. He was pointed out to me by the clerk in the land office at Santa Fe. An' Ganton was with him . . . ."

"Yeah!" came a bawling voice from the door of another cabin. "An' them two standin' beside Ganton is the pair we chased after that killin' at the dam!"

OF all the men who heard those charges, Dan was perhaps the only one who wasn't surprised. But even he was startled at the flashing draw exhibited by the

shyster lawyer. It was the draw of a killer!

"Yo're a liar!" Gabe Ganton was yelling. "It's a lie!"

His gun lifted, spoke. With a groan, Boone Dawson fell, still clinging to the white flag that insures protection among all civilized men. Then Ganton was whirling throwing the muzzle of the smoking weapon upon Dan.

"And, as for you—you meddling whelp —I'll . . . ."

But he didn't catch the Sleeping S boss unprepared. Dan's shoulders settled as he drove his right hand holsterward. His gun swept from its leather sheath, flaming as it cleared the lip. The buzzard-like killer, gasping, reeling backward, tried to bring his weapon to its target. But his strength wasn't up to it. With an agonized cry, he fell, his deep eyes venting the last of their light in a look of unutterable hate. And Dan, with the same cold mercilessness he would have shown a deadly fanging snake, emptied his gun into the quivering body.

Yet, in that bit of unleashed savagery, Dan must surely have died save for the aid of both friend and enemy. The two gunman-bodyguards, caught in the web of Ganton's spinning, were throwing their guns about in a desperate play to shoot their way free. But Red Curnan's finger was already on the trigger of his gun. He dropped one of the men. A bullet from the cabins killed the other. Then guns were blasting from the houses and the valley men had dropped again behind their bulwark.

Red Curnan was strangely bent as he hunkered against the bank. Dan was shouting at his fellows:

"No return fire, boys! Holster yore irons an' keep 'em holstered unless they come at us. There's nothin' left to fight for. The man who betrayed us all is dead. Hang an' rattle."

Which they did . . . . until darkness spread its welcome mantle over the land. And not until then did Dan give the order to withdraw. Red lay on his face, sleeping. Dan shook him. The body was cold, stiff. Red, in saving Dan, had taken a slung from the Texans. He had cried for war, had tasted it, had paid for his fun . . . .

Tenderly, Dan lifted him, waded across the stream. As they rode back to the valley with their dead, Dan's mind dwelt upon the savagery of past days . . . . and its toll. Both sides had been right, and both sides were wrong. They were all victims of a monster who had walked toward a realization of his dreams of empire, over the bodies of those who had trusted him. Gabe Ganton had planned well. He had failed only because his hireling gunmen had not killed Dan that night on the porch of the Sleeping S. Had that bullet gone an inch lower, the two factions of Stirrup Basin would have torn each other to pieces and the survivors would have been glad to leave the empire Ganton had planned to water with the usurped flow of Apache Creek.

But Ganton was dead, now. Peace seemed a phantom thing, far off and untouchable. Yet Dan knew that old sores heal in march of time. And scars grow dim with the years. Hope, the basin's richest heritage, lived on.

A WEEK had ticked away into eternity. The cooling breeze of evening settled into the Stirrup Basin like a benediction. Dan sat rocking in the rawhide chair beneath the fragrant vines, looking toward the spreading cottonwood whose shade cooled two freshly turned graves. Hub Stockton lay sleeping there alongside Red Curnan. That was the price the Sleeping S had paid.

From the east came the rattle of a rig. In a cloud of dust, a buckboard whirled

in the gate, drew to a stop before the porch. Wanly smiling Doc Crandall stepped out, nodded at Dan and sank down on the stoop with a grateful sigh.

"Business is slowin' down," he confided, shaving at a plug to stoke his pipe. "Wounds are all healin' an' the last dressin' has bin placed. It's bin a mean chore, Dan. One I hope never tuh face again . . . . if I starve tuh death fer lack uh business. I've just come from the mesa. I reckon it'll be a long time before them folks can smile again."

"Wimmen all right up yonder?" asked Dan, trying to keep his voice casual. "None of 'em hurt?"

"Nary a scratch, Dan. But porely fer all that. They're sufferin' from an ailment that only the Great Doctor kin heal in his own good time. It's the wimmen who pay in a ruckus like we've just witnessed. They talk ag'in' violence an' get it throwed back into their teeth. They worry fer their headstrong men while they're fightin'—an' mourn 'em after they're gone. Yep . . . . they suffer the most."

"That's right, Doc." Dan toyed with his cigarette and the medico rose.

"I'll give a look at them two bunkhouse boys long as I'm up here, Dan. Their wounds is shorely on the mend but it won't hurt tuh give one last look. By the way, Chet Hammond got back from Santa Fe today. Boone Dawson was right. Gabe Ganton had filed on the water in the name of a hireling. Likewise he'd incorporated a land an' irrigation company. Funny how that feller fooled us, ain't it?"

"Yeah," Dan answered him absently. "Funny . . . ."

Doc Crandall moved slowly, wearily toward the bunkhouse. Dan watched him go. A great loneliness settled over him. The house behind him seemed eternally empty. The sunset-tinted Apaches beckoned him, drew him toward Painted Mesa against the unrelenting resistance of his stubbornness. For days Dan had fought against that pull. He was about to the point where resistance seems a futile and senseless thing.

"It is senseless!" he muttered aloud, and stood up. "The self torture of a damn fool!"

The wilful giving in to the thing he had so long fought seemed to fire him. With hurried steps, he strode to the corral, laid a saddle on his fastest pony. Disregarding the cries of his curious hands at the bunkhouse, he roared out the gate and toward the mesa.

"A man must fight for the things he wants!" Hub Stockton had preached that. Gail had echoed it. Worthwhile things don't come easy. What he wanted was on yonder mesa. It might mean fight to venture up there . . . . probably would. All right. He would fight. Mebbyso she would spurn him. He had it coming. But without the try, there would always be torture in his mind.

Twilight was settling down as he roared into the dooryard of the Dawson home. A group of grim faced, hard-eyed men had just ridden in before him and were standing grouped in the doorway as Dan lit down. Every one wore a gun—and each had his hand on his weapon as he stared with unfeigned antagonism at Dan.

Poker-faced, with no show of the emotion seething through him, Dan stepped up to them, his spurs chiming a martial refrain. They made no move to give way and Dan stood before them, tall, drawn, picturesque in high-peaked Stetson, new Levi's and spike-heeled boots. He stood there regarding them, his eyes running appraisingly over them, one by one, his head up, chin level, frosty eyes aglint. Dan was a striking figure washed by the vivid colors of the afterglow and limned against the darkening peaks of the Apaches.

No one spoke. When Dan had eyed each of them in turn, he parted them bodily, stepped to the door, rapped. A woman opened to him. Dan stepped around her and stood face to face with Gail—a pale, hollow-eyed Gail stamped with the marks of a suffering that must follow her to the grave.

"Why do you come here?" she demanded, tonelessly. "What do you want?"

"I want you, Gail!"

"You said that before . . . ."

"I meant it before, just as I mean it now," he said. "I've bin a fool, Gail. Not quite so big a fool as those who blindly listened to Ganton, but a fool nevertheless. Get your things. We're riding to the Sleeping S."

"You said—" Gail was very close to tears— "said for me never to come back!"

"I'm saying now," he returned doggedly, "for you never to forget that it's your home, that you're my wife, that I love you and . . . ."

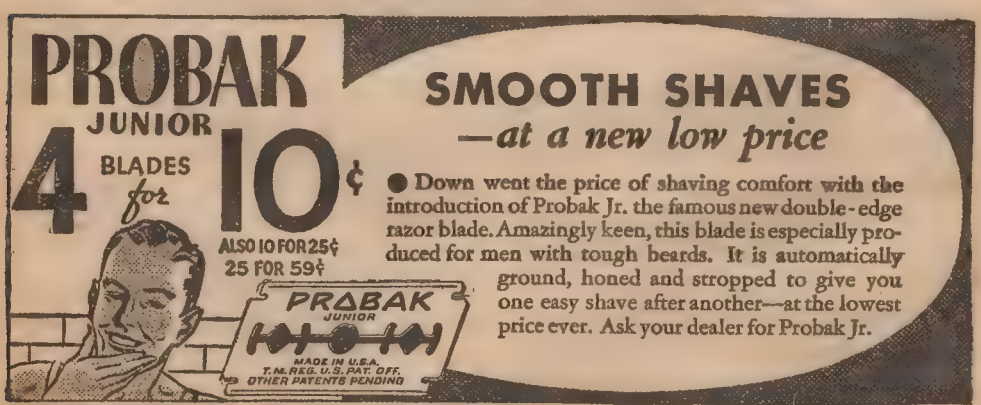
He walked to her, folded her into his strong arms. She pressed against him, lifted her eyes. "Your wife . . . ." she whispered, and her eyes were smiling again, "forever . . . . and ever! Take me home, Dan."

Hand in hand they walked outside, threaded the ranks of the scowling warriors who seemed gripped in some strange hypnosis. Dan lifted Gail to the saddle, flung up behind. His eyes turned to the staring men.

"Remember this . . . . always!" he said, fiercely. 'The man who upset the peace of this valley is dead. Those of us who steep in our hate will shrivel and die. This is a big and fruitful country that challenges men to tame it. There's so much to be done and a man's life is so short. Get on with yore plans, just as Boone Dawson would have wanted you to. And if you need help, come to me and you'll get it, just as Hub Stockton would have given it to you. Good bye and good luck."

He was smiling a little as he stirred the pony into a lope toward the Sleeping S. The lead that had been thrown had scarred, but hadn't impaired the leather of their souls. Anger lingered with them all, a killing hate with some. But time would heal that—time and the wise leadership that Dan now felt capable of assuming, just as his father had assumed it before him.

THE END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In the Coming Issue

A GREAT NOVEL OF THE
BOOTHILL BRIGADE
By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Out Sept. Fifth!

Framed In Gunsmoke!

By John G. Pearsol

(Author of "Payment Deferred," etc.)

Buck Brady came back after five years of unearned prison hell, seeking the weakling foster-brother who had betrayed him. But Buck Brady found he had a soul above petty vengeance; the kind of manhood that may, at times, bring courage and strength to the weak by its own glorious example.

THE moon sifted soft silver down on the three riders, dim, barely discernable shapes in the shadows of the overhanging cliffs that topped the winding road. Waiting there, they sat their broncs motionlessly, their narrowed eyes fixed on the road below them.

Cal Brady, taller and more youthful than the others, swayed slightly in his saddle.

"I'm damn tired of it," he said in a thick-tongued voice. "He was jes' picked up by the old man. Didn't even have a name. The old man adopted him, calls him Buck Brady. Give him a name as good as mine, an' is gonna give him half of everything. Made a will—"

One of the other riders turned, waved an impatient hand. "Why cry about it?" he asked. "You're framin' him tonight, ain't yuh?"

Cal Brady nodded drunkenly.

"You're damn right," he said. "After tonight, Buck Brady won't be ace high with nobody—the old man, Mary Adams, or nobody. You can't fool with Cal Brady, gents, I—"

"You're drunk," said the other gent. "Now watch yore step. The stage is comin'!"

The third rider, caller Pinto, chuckled. "If he wasn't drunk he wouldn't be here," he said. "He's so damn yella he'd faint if a fella pointed a gun at him."

"Who's yella—"

"You are, Brady! An' if yore father wasn't the sheriff, an' you wasn't able to tip us off on these shipments, we wouldn't let you git within a hundred yards of us!"

The three sank back deeper in the shadows, watching the stage, drawn by four horses, climb the steep slope below them. Walton, the taller of the two with Cal

Brady, eased out of his kak. He reached up, took a hat from Cal's saddle horn, put it on and adjusted a mask over his face.

"Git set now," he told the others. "When I git 'em stopped you ease that pinto bronc out in the moonlight. Do it like it was skittery, like it wasn't meant to be, *sabe?* I'll wear his hat. An' don't crowd in too far. They'll see the bronc all right."

The stage came on. . . .

WALTON stepped out suddenly, two guns in his hands. The driver cursed, pulled back on his reins.

"Stick 'em high!" Walton snapped.

The driver's hands went up.

"Everybody out," Walton called, and a man and woman came hesitantly out of the stage.

"You folks rest easy. Throw down that bank shipment."

The woman was nervous and kept her hands up to her throat. The driver cursed some more, tossed down a heavy sealed canvas sack. There was a commotion in the rocks at the side of the road. A pinto bronc, it's flank marked with a peculiar cross-like splash of white, pranced nervously out into the moonlight, then was pulled back in again. The driver started an ejaculation, then shut his mouth, stared straight ahead.

Walton, the bandit, waved a hand mockingly, stepped over and looked closely at the woman. He took her hand down from her throat, saw a gold locket dangling on her breast. He reached up, pulled, and the tiny chain snapped.

"That's purty," Walton said.

He waved an arm again, motioned with the gun in his hand. The woman and man got back in the stage. The driver took up the reins, then the stage rattled on.

Walton ran back to Cal Brady and the other gent. He leaped in his saddle, split the canvas sack and took out a bundle of currency. He tossed it to Cal Brady.

"Here," he said. "Now beat it, pronto!"

Cal Brady looked down at the tiny bundle of bills. He opened his mouth, started to object, then closed it again. Walton laughed, tossed the tiny locket to Brady.

"Here's a soovineer," he said. "A doodad you can give to yore gal. Now beat it, yella-belly."

Cal Brady caught the locket, stuffed the bills in his pocket, galloped his bronc across the trail, up over the hills. He raced it toward a tiny light that glowed in the distance. Near it he slowed, let his bronc breathe, then went to the corral and unsaddled. He had a drawn, strained expression about his mouth that showed above his weak chin as he entered the lamplighted house. His eyes were nervous, shifty, fear-filled, and his hands shook as he paced through a rear door, entered a room and placed half the bills from his pocket in the pocket of a shirt that hung on a peg on the wall.

He went out into the other room, looked down at his hands, still shaking from fear and excitement. He cursed, went over to a cupboard, took a bottle from a shelf and tipped it up. After the long swig of liquor, Cal Brady's hands didn't shake so much. His bloodshot eyes steadied a bit. And he smiled.

BUCK BRADY stood in his cell at the Sierra Blanca jail. He gripped the bars on the door in front of him, looked into the eyes of old Flash Brady, the sheriff who wore a star on his vest. Flash Brady's old eyes held a lot of understanding in their gray depths.

"You don't have to tell me, son," he said. "I *know* yuh didn't do it. But that bronc, with that white cross on it—that makes it look bad. Yuh say yuh was ridin' it. The money they found in yore shirt pocket checks with the numbers at the bank. Yuh say yuh don't know where it come from."

Old Flash smiled. "I believe you, Buck," he said. "But I'm afraid a jury won't."

"I know it," Buck Brady said miserably.

Old Flash plodded down the jail corrider. Buck Brady sat down on a cot, looked unseeingly at the stone walls. He looked up again as Cal Brady came in. There was whiskey on Cal's breath, and a hint of uncertainty in his shifty eyes.

Buck Brady didn't get up. He sat there and looked at the son of the man who had adopted him when he was a homeless, friendless shaver.

"You sure made a fool of yoreself," Cal said to Buck.

Buck Brady looked down at his hands, rubbed them together softly.

"I been made a fool of, Cal," he acknowledged. "That much is a cinch."

"It's a sure lucky thing Mary Adams is away," Cal said. "She'd take this kinda hard, seein' the gent she was gonna marry—"

He stopped as Buck Brady looked up. "Well," he sighed, "if I can do anything, just let me know, Buck."

"Yeah, I'll let you know."

But nobody did much for Buck Brady. They took him out of his cell, showed him the money that a deputy sheriff had found in his pocket. They told a jury about the pinto bronc with the white cross on it's flank. They asked Buck where the rest of the money was; who had been with him when he robbed the stage.

Buck Brady raised his head, looked at the suspicion in the eyes of these gents he'd known for many a year, saw the fact that they thought he was guilty. And a flood or resentment made his blue eyes flash fire.

"You go to hell," he said coldly. "I see the kind of a deal I'm gettin', so go ahead, do yore damndest!"

They did. Maybe not their damndest, but they sent Buck Brady up for five years, and Buck had *sabe* enough to know that if it hadn't been for the life-long, stainless reputation of old Flash Brady, his foster-father, that he'd have gotten a lot stiffer sentence than that.

So Buck Brady kept his tongue between his teeth and went to Yuma. He stayed there for five years. Five years in which Buck Brady got the *Sierra Blanca Blade*, the home county newspaper every week. And Buck Brady, in those five years of waiting, working, wondering, came to the firm conclusion that whoever had that paper mailed to him each week, hated him. For there were many, many things in it that cut Buck to the quick.

He read that Mary Adams, the girl he was to have married, had returned from her visit to Texas. The county fair was at Sierra Blanca, Arizona. Mary Adams was hostess to a group of guests from the East.

Old Flash Brady was killed. Shot by a gun-hawk who had tried to rob the Sierra Blanca Bank. But old Flash Brady had killed the robber too.

The years dragged by, painful, torturing years that put rock in Buck Brady's face, flint in his eyes, and mad ideas in his mind.

Four years. Four years and six months. Six more months to go!

Then a paper said that Cal Brady, the son of the celebrated Flash Brady, was to marry Mary Adams. They'd be married in a month. Cal Brady—the yellow-livered weakling. Not fit to lick the boots of the man whose name he bore. Marrying Mary Adams!

The lines deepened about Buck Brady's mouth. The days crawled by. Then Cal Brady and Mary Adams were married. Buck Brady read it a hundred times, then cursed the paper and the unknown person who had mailed it to him.

And then, just one day before the five years were gone, Buck Brady stood before the prison warden.

"You're wrong, Brady," the warden

said. "You've got the wrong slant. If the jury made a mistake when they sent you here, they did it honestly. Every criminal *says* he's innocent, and nothing's foolproof. If they made a mistake in you, go back, live where you came from. Show them they were wrong. Don't let a few years here spoil all the rest of your life."

But as the warden looked into Buck Brady's face, saw into his flinty eyes, he knew he was talking to a stone wall. He sighed, waved his hand.

"Leave in the morning, Brady," he said. "Good-bye."

The warden thrust out his hand. Brady looked at it, took it. And as he shook the first hand he had clasped in his own for five years, Buck Brady had a peculiar feeling that perhaps this gent was right. Maybe he better go back to Sierra Blanca. At least he'd find out who had sent him those papers.

IN the few years since his father's death, Cal Brady had made some interesting discoveries—some that made him proud, and some that made him hang his head mentally, in shame. For Cal Brady had discovered that old Flash Brady had been a man among men—a gent who'd take no damn back-talk; a ranny who'd lived his own life, honest, fearless and upright, and ask no favors from any one. He realized that the name of Brady was an honored one.

Since Cal Brady was, as he thought truly, the last of the real blood Bradys, his head was held a little higher. His chest stuck out a little more; there was more of sureness in his carriage than there had ever been before. Cal Brady was proud that he was a Brady.

Cal Brady was married. He had a bride that he'd always wanted, even when Buck Brady had been free. A girl that Buck Brady had wanted, too. But a girl who had listened a bit too closely to the smooth tongue of Cal Brady. And Cal Brady was proud of his wife—the prettiest gal west of the Pecos.

And now came the crowning glory of all: the county of Sierra Blanca had elected Cal Brady sheriff. He'd ridden to glory on the fame of his father. He'd risen to the heights his gun-slinging dad had attained. And as Cal Brady walked down the streets of Sierra Blanca he held his head high, his eyes steady; walked with a sure-footed confidence that had not been his for many a day. And Cal Brady forgot all about the dirty deal he'd given a gent named Buck Brady, a gent his father had adopted and given his own name.

The yellow lights from Sierra Blanca's windows shot golden streamers of light into the darkened street as Cal Brady went toward the sheriff's office. He reached up his left hand, felt of the silver star that had been pinned on his chest earlier this same day. Then he stopped, watched two figures that showed dimly in the shadows at a street intersection. They seemed to be watching, waiting for him.

He slowed, walked slowly forward. The two figures moved out, blocked his path. Cal Brady saw that they were Walton, and Pinto, the two gents who had been with him when the stage had been robbed five years ago.

They grinned, silently, watched him with knowing eyes as he stood there uncertainly.

"Howdy," Walton finally said. *"Sheriff!"* Walton laughed softly, mockingly.

"Long time no see," Pinto said softly.

"Yeah," Cal Brady grinned. "Howdy, boys. How are you?"

Walton stepped forward, hooked an arm in Cal's. Pinto stepped to Cal's other side. They both propelled him up the street.

"Yuh know," Walton said. "This is just the thing—you gettin' elected sheriff. Now we can start our li'l play all over again.

You'll git the tips. Me an' Pinto does the dirty work. Then we split—like we did before."

Cal Brady took ten steps in silence.

"I get one per cent," he said bitterly. "You get ninety-nine, eh?"

Walton stepped away from Cal. Pinto stood out too. They stopped him. Walton grinned, raised a hand and pointed at the glittering star that showed dully in the dim light of the deserted street.

"Listen, yella-belly," he rasped. "This county may have elected yuh sheriff. To these folks yuh might be a gun-slingin' Brady. But to us you're just a double-crossin' coyote that framed Buck Brady into th' pen. You're a yella-livered snake. An' you'll do as I say or you'll git some lead in yore guts!"

Then Walton let his arm drop, his fingers brush the gun at his hip. "Well," he asked, waiting. "You playin' with us—or throwin' a gun?"

And then, for the first time in his life, Cal Brady really realized what he was. For the only time in his life he knew the difference from the esteem you earn on your own merits and the esteem you get from happening to have the same name as somebody else. And Cal Brady knew, as well as he knew that he was alive, that he didn't have the guts to sling a gun with a gent who'd call his hand.

"You win, Walton," he said, low-voiced. "I'll do anything you say."

BUCK BRADY went into the penitentiary a young man with no bitterness, not much thought of hate or to get revenge even on those who had framed him. He came out a bitter, cynical, line-faced man, with eyes of flint, who hated with every atom of his being, whoever it had been who put him there. With almost as bitter a hatred against whoever had sent him the weekly paper, to torture him, to taunt him with its news of things he wanted to forget.

When Buck Brady alighted from the stage at Sierra Blanca at dark, he stalked down the street, big black hat well over his eyes, walking with the swift noiseless tread of a wolf, his shoulders slightly forward, his arms loose, and with a slight bulge in the waist band of his levis.

He headed into the dimly lighted office of the *Sierra Blanca Blade*, eyed the bent form of Davis, the publisher. Davis looked up, squinted as though trying to recall the features that stared stonily at him.

"Who sent the *Blade* to Buck Brady while he was in the pen?" Buck asked.

Davis scratched his head, seemed to be trying to remember who stood in front of him, rather than to answer the question.

"Why," he said at last, "it was Cal Brady. He sent—"

"Much obliged," Buck Brady muttered, whirled and went out again.

"So that rat did it," he muttered to himself as he went up the street again. "Wanted me to see how he'd taken my place."

He passed two men in a darkened part of the street. They were talking, walking slowly.

"Didn't think he had it in him," one was saying. "But Cal Brady has come up. Right in the footsteps of his pap."

"He'll make a good sheriff," the other said. "An' he's shore as hell proud of the star."

Buck Brady stopped, watched the two fade from his sight. "Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered again. "He *is* sheriff!"

Buck Brady walked dazedly on. He stopped, looked at the door of the courthouse, through which he had walked five years ago, headed for the pen. And a bitter twist came to his lips. A hall of justice, eh? Justice—hell!

Then a finger tapped Buck on the shoulder. He whirled, leaped away, flashed his hand toward the waistband of his levis. But the man who now stood in front of him raised a hand.

"Buck," he said. "Buck Brady. It's you, isn't it?"

And now Buck recognized him. Evans, the judge who had sentenced him to jail.

"It's me," Buck said coldly.

"I'm glad you're back," Evans said. He looked at Buck's tattered hat, his dirty shirt, his old levis. He seemed to appraise him. His hand went in his pocket, came out with a thick wallet. He handed it to Brady.

"I saw you come in on the stage," he said. "I went home and got this. It's two thousand dollars, cash, from old Flash Brady. There's a signed deed in it too, for half interest in his Half Moon spread. It was his will—in case you had the nerve to come back here and start again.

Evans smiled. "Flash knew you would come," he continued. "I—I noticed you weren't so—well, I thought you might need some money—tonight. Good luck, Buck."

Buck Brady watched Judge Evans go down the street. Dazed, stunned, he watched Evans' fat form vanish. Then he looked down at the wallet. His mind whirled. Here he was—thinking of revenge—when—

Buck Brady saw a tall form coming up the street. He eased back in the shadows. He didn't want to see anybody now. He watched the form go past, sensed a familiarity in it, saw a shiny badge on the fellow's vest. Was this gent—

Then two dim forms stepped out of the shadows. They stopped the first man, started up the street with him. Then they all stopped again. Their voices rose, and Buck Brady moved closer, kept in the shadows till he could hear what these gents were saying. Clear, cold, contemptuous, a voice came clearly to Buck Brady. "—yella belly. This country may have elected yuh sheriff; to these folks yuh might be a gun-slingin' Brady. But to us you're just a double-crossin' coyote that framed Buck Brady into th' pen. You're a yella-livered snake. An' you'll do as I say or you'll git lead in yore yella guts!"

He saw Cal Brady walk slowly up the street. He saw the others vanish in the darkness. He stood there, he didn't know how long, watching the door in which Cal Brady had gone, while he slowly grasped this thing that seemed to him too degraded to be real.

His foster-brother, Cal Brady! The son of the finest white man God ever let live! He'd framed Buck Brady!

And Buck Brady drew his gun slowly from his shirt front. He paced forward, his glowing eyes fastened on the door of the sheriff's office. He stopped, saw Cal Brady inside the lighted room. And Buck Brady shuddered, shivered with the terrible passion that drenched his whole soul with hate.

Then Buck let his shoulders slump. He felt the thick wallet in his pocket. He looked again at the man who had taken his life, wrecked it. And Buck laughed. There was a man who deserved to die, but Buck Brady couldn't kill him. Flash Brady's ghost protected him. Mary Adams protected him.

Then Buck Brady went away, strode down the street in the darkness.

GRIM-FACED, tight-lipped, his eyes spots of flint in his stony face, Buck Brady made his way down the street. Of the few people he passed he paid no attention. Over and over in his mind seethed the thing he had just discovered. Cal Brady, a kid he'd been raised with! The son of—

Two men passed. They, too, talked of

the newly-elected sheriff. "Bradys allus did make good sheriffs."

Buck Brady snorted, turned in a store that was nearly darkened. He knew the gent who was behind the counter—Simms, an old man, with spectacles on his thin nose. A little gray hair waved astray on his bald head. He peered closely at Buck, nodded.

Buck nodded at Simms, told him he wanted a new outfit. And while he bought it, changed his shirt, levis, put new boots on his feet, old man Simms studied the face that set stonily now under a big new black hat.

"Don't I know you?" he asked Buck.

Buck got up. He started toward the door. "You ought to know me," he said bitterly, "but the folks around here have kinda worked me over—in the last five years."

As the door slammed behind him, Simms muttered excitedly.

"By damn!" he said. "Buck Brady!"

Buck Brady got a bronc and a new kak. While he mounted, rode out of town, toward the Half Moon ranch, the lines about his slitted mouth grew deeper. His eyes slitted, and a hard and mirthless laugh came dryly from his throat again.

Maybe he couldn't kill his foster brother. Maybe the memory of old Flash Brady would prevent him from killing a skunk. Maybe a good girl, who perhaps loved this lying, sneaking coyote, would stand between him and death. But he'd make him pay!

He'd go to the Half Moon. He'd live there. He'd stay with the girl who had married Cal Brady. He'd torture them, as they had tortured him.

Then, half way to the ranch, the drum of hoofs behind him made Buck Brady ease his bronc off the trail. He inched behind a manzanita clump, watched Cal Brady gallop past. And Buck Brady grinned.

"He jest heard I'm here," he told himself. "Cal's tryin' to ketch me before I get to the ranch."

Then Buck Brady rode slowly on, pulled up in the Half Moon ranch-yard. He dismounted, walked toward the lighted doorway that had opened and showed Cal Brady and Mary.

Mary Brady's hands flew to her throat, and she gasped a startled little exclamation as Buck Brady's hard, lined face showed under his hat in the light from the open door. Cal Brady's eyes were filled with fear, but he swallowed once, thrust out his hand.

"Hello, Buck," he said. "I'm—I'm glad—you're back."

Buck Brady ignored the proffered hand. He stepped past the two, went in the room that had been his home five years ago.

"I bet you are," he said coldly.

Mary stood still, her right hand at her throat.

Cal looked closely at Buck Brady. "I saw Evans," he said. "He told me that he'd seen you." Cal seemed to hesitate. "You're gonna—you'll stay here?"

"Why not?" Buck's eyes were cold. "Don't half of it belong to me?"

Cal Brady's eyes avoided Buck's. He walked nervously over to a window.

"Well," he started. "You see, Buck, I'm sheriff now. I stay in town most of the time. Mary, she stays here, with three punchers." Cal raised his hand, made an unnecessary mark on the window pane. "Folks might talk," he went on, "about you an' Mary."

"I don't think there'll be much talk," Buck said.

Cal turned around. "I'll buy your interest," he said.

"Not for sale," Buck smiled his cold smile again. "I'm gonna like ranchin'—after five years away from it."

Mary Brady came forward. She placed a hand on Buck Brady's arm.

"Please," she said. "I can see what will happen. There's something—between you two. It will be unbearable—for all of us. Please sell your interest to Cal."

"I must be snaky," Buck Brady said ironically. "Been away five years, an' the first thing when I get back I'm asked to move on and not bother anybody. Sorry, folks, but I'm ranchin' on the Half Moon."

But as he stalked away, went into the room that was away from the main one where Mary and Cal Brady were, Buck Brady nearly softened. He'd wanted to take that girl in his arms, tell her she could have the ranch, his life, anything she wanted. But when he remembered the two men who had stood in front of Cal Brady, remembered the words that had proven that Cal had framed him to prison, his eyes grew flinty again.

THE yellow moonlight made the lights that glowed from the windows of the Half Moon ranch house seem pale. Cal Brady, swayed in his saddle. He was drunk. He'd been drunk for a week, ever since he'd dashed out to the Half Moon ranch on learning that Buck Brady had come back from the pen and had gone to the Half Moon to take up his share of old Flash Brady's inheritance.

Cal Brady was afraid. Afraid that Buck would discover that Cal had framed him, that he'd discover that Cal had lied a hell of a lot to Mary Adams before he married her. And when Cal Brady had looked into Buck Brady's cold flinty eyes a week ago, Cal Brady had shivered with the fear of death. For Buck Brady had looked like death.

Cal Brady came to the Half Moon every night now. He came with his courage bolstered with whiskey, with his eyes bloodshot, mumbling, muttering, hating the man whose life he had ruined.

He climbed clumsily down from his bronc, strode to the door and pushed it open. His wife, Mary—the girl Mary Adams, who had been engaged to marry Buck Brady—sat in a chair at a table in the center of the room. She looked at Cal Brady with blue eyes that were shadowed with the horror of an unbearable existence for a week past. A week of living in the same house with a man she had said she loved, but whose eyes and face now looked hate at everything. A week of enduring drunken mumblings, false accusations, from this man she had married.

Cal Brady stumbled into the room. His bloodshot eyes swept nervously about. He looked at his wife. He looked at the closed door that led to a room that Buck Brady occupied.

"Where's—where's Buck?"

Mary Brady didn't look up from the paper she was reading. "Out," she said.

Cal mumbled, grumbled cursingly. "Out!" he said. "Looking at the moon, settin' up on Angel's Peak, watchin' the stars!"

"I suppose so."

"You suppose so! You know so. An' I know things, too! I know you still love that jailbird. I know he's gotta leave here an' if—if he don't—"

Mary Brady raised her eyes. "What?" she asked. "What if he don't?"

But Cal Brady didn't answer. He looked past the woman. His eyes narrowed. And his lips twisted into a crafty grin. "Nothin'," he muttered softly. "I—I was jes' thinkin'. I got a idea. . . ."

Then he turned and went out, mounted and galloped back toward Sierra Blanca.

But Buck Brady, high on the top of Angel Peak, looking at the beauty of the moonlight desert below him, feeling the fresh wind from the mountains in his face, had ideas too.

Buck Brady was discovering that revenge wasn't as sweet as he thought. Revenge was bitter, distasteful. He was be-

ginning to believe that maybe he wasn't justified in what he was doing. Mary wasn't responsible for Cal's actions. She hadn't had any part in framing Buck Brady. Maybe—

Buck turned his bronc, rode north, skirted the Half Moon ranch, and made his way into Sierra Blanca. He went to the sheriff's office, looked for Cal Brady. But he wasn't there. Then he took two pieces of paper, wrote on both of them, put them in one envelope and addressed it to Cal Brady. He laid the envelope on the desk top, went outside and rode south again.

He rode over the same trail he had come up, skirting the ranch, mounting Angel Peak. But as he started to climb that lead to the summit he slowed his bronc. He peered steadily into a deep narrow gorge through which he must pass. He stopped his bronc, felt a cold, tingly feeling crawl up his spine.

A deep, breathless silence pervaded the desert. A silence that was ominous to Buck Brady. In it he sensed a feeling he could not define, that told him of danger, made him ease his hand back toward the gun at his hip.

And then the soft rumble of hoof beats behind him sounded faintly. He turned, looked back across the yellow sands. A rider was spearing toward him, outlined faintly in the yellow light of the moon. A furiously galloping horse surged along the trail, carrying a rider whose arm waved up and down frantically as he slapped his mount on the rump. And as he watched, Buck Brady saw the shine of metal on the rider's vest, metal that glittered faintly in the pale light.

CAL BRADY, swaying unsteadily in his saddle, rode into the lower end of Sierra Blanca. He stopped at a tiny 'dobe that squatted some distance away from the rest of the town, a yellow streamer of light glowing from its dirty window. He dismounted, went to the door, opened it and went in.

There was Walton, and Pinto, the two who had been with Cal Brady when he had framed Buck. The two who had called the turn on Cal just a week ago. Walton grinned and looked at Cal Brady contemptuously from his black eyes. Pinto's face was expressionless, his pale blue eyes watery, as he watched Cal Brady.

"Now listen," Cal said to them both. "I've told you I'd play ball with you. Now you play ball with me."

"We're listenin'," Walton said, but not very interestedly.

"Buck Brady is raisin' hell," Cal said viciously. "He's—he's—well, he's gotta die—tonight!"

Walton just raised his eyebrows. Pinto didn't move or change expression.

"He's up on Angel's Peak now," Cal said. "He'll stay there till late. He always does. Go up the back way, kill him, come back here an' I'll give you a thousan' dollars—five hundred apiece."

Walton sighed, reached for his hat. Pinto let a tiny gleam come into his eyes.

Then Cal went out into the night. He rode up to the sheriff's office, dismounted and went inside. He still staggered a bit, and his eyes were bloodshot. He sank in the chair beside the desk and looked out over its top to the door.

Then he saw an envelope with his name on it. He ripped it open.

Cal,

I've known you were the one that framed the deal on me ever since I came back. I've known that you lied to Mary to keep her from writing to me, so that you could marry her. And I intended to make you live in a little bit of hell that I lived in for five years. But I can't do it. I can't let Mary suffer. And I can't see you shame old Flash Brady's name by your drinking.

I'm leaving tonight, riding south over

Angel Peak. Find enclosed a bill of sale to you for my half of the ranch. It's yours and I'll be out of the picture. Maybe you couldn't help doing what you did.

Good luck,

Buck Brady.

And as Cal Brady read and re-read that note, he realized the difference between a man and a coyote. He felt again the difference between the esteem you earn and the kind that comes by bearing the name of another. And here was a gent, Buck Brady, only an adopted son, who was giving up a ranch, a home, so that Cal Brady could feel free, and unworried, to carry on to bring no shame to that name.

Cal Brady rose slowly to his feet. His face was pale as death. He looked on the wall, at a picture of old Flash Brady, his stern blue eyes peering straight out at Cal. He looked at the old guns with which old Flash had earned his fame, a silver plate on the handles which read: "Presented . . . by the County of Sierra Blanca."

And even now Buck Brady was riding south over Angel Peak, with Pinto and Walton waiting! Then Cal Brady cursed. He cursed himself, Pinto and Walton. He cursed the cowardice that had been his and that somehow he could never master, that he knew he couldn't master now, even with Buck Brady's death in the balance. But at least he could stop Buck Brady, head him in a different route.

He raced out of the office, leaped on his bronc and galloped out of town. The sage and mesquite flew past as the bronc's hoofs drummed along the trail. Cal Bradys' hat blew away; the wind plastered his shirt against his skin. Far ahead he saw a rider, and then Cal Brady was drawing in his mount, looking at Buck Brady's cold eyes, his lined face.

"Buck," he said hesitantly, "I—"

"Forget it," Buck said. "I'm gonna do my damndest to try to."

To save his soul from hell Cal Brady couldn't rake up the guts to tell this man he'd already sent to prison that he'd planned also to have him killed. He couldn't tell him to take another route. Buck would know then, too, that there were bushwhackers ahead of him.

"Mary," he blurted, "she wants to see you, Buck. It's important."

Buck looked at Cal for a long moment. Then he sighed, turned his bronc.

"Okay," he said, "You comin' back, too?"

"I'll be along," Cal said. "You go ahead."

CAL BRADY watched Buck ride away. He looked up that dark canyon. He smiled a soft smile that made him look like old Flash Brady.

"I wonder if I could," he muttered.

Then a fierce expression crossed his face. He leaped from his mount, slapped it on the rump, watched it gallop away.

"I won't run away," he muttered fiercely. "Not on you, anyway!"

But Cal Brady knew, as he looked again in that dark canyon, that he would run, that he'd scream and beg for mercy, that he'd run like a whipped cur. And he cursed himself again, viciously. He knew that Walton and Pinto would stalk out of that canyon after a while, that they'd kill Buck Brady somewhere, somehow; and that they'd come to collect their thousand dollars.

Cal Brady whipped out a pair of handcuffs, snapped one circlet of steel about his own wrist, stepped over and snapped the other about a mesquite stem that was about the thickness of a man's wrist, tough, unweilding, unbreakable.

"Now," he whispered shakily, "maybe you'll be a Brady."

But his hand that was encircled with that steel cuff, shook, rattled violently. His eyes darted nervously about. Maybe if he

called to Walton, told him who he was they wouldn't shoot.

Frenzy, panic, a fear that was wild, unreasonable, shook his entire being. He jerked, pulled with every ounce of his strength on that mesquite, tried to free his wrist again. His left hand darted to his pocket. He'd unlock it! Then he whimpered, cried aloud. The key was in his left pocket, and he couldn't get his hand to it.

Cal Brady lived a thousand years in the few minutes that he stood shackled to that mesquite. Alternately, while he stood there, he cursed himself for a coward, then cried, screaming in a frenzy of fear.

Then he froze. His blood congealed in his veins. Two dark shapes were coming out of that canyon mouth.

A shot licked out at him. A bullet whizzed past his ear. He screamed but his cry was drowned by the roar of Walton's guns. His own gun came up as Pinto unlimbered his irons. And screaming, shaking that mesquite, trying to escape, but firing at those two shapes that charged him, Cal Brady felt the sickening shock of bullets in his body.

Then suddenly he stopped his whimpering. He felt, with the back of his hand, where a bullet had entered his side. His gun came up again. His hand steadied. His shots, evenly spaced, knocked Walton from his saddle. He shot again, killed Pinto as more slugs whipped into him.

Cal Brady dropped his gun. His body sagged. He reached weakly under his shirt, pulled out a tiny golden locket, threw it fiercely toward the inert Pinto, dead, just a few feet in front of him.

Then there was quiet on the desert. Suspended from that mesquite, held up by a wristlet of steel, Cal Brady hung limply. He was dead with six bullets in his body. And out before him, stretched on the sands, were Walton and Pinto, their eyes looking up at a moon they could not see.

And there, with his two dead in front of him, Mary and Buck found him. They looked at the stern, fighting expression on Cal's face, an expression that was frozen there. They looked at the circlet of steel that had kept him chained to his post of duty. And Buck Brady smiled at Mary.

"It don't make much difference," he murmured softly, "about the mistakes a gent has made—if he cleans 'em up, at last."

And when they buried Cal Brady in the cemetery, beside the body of his gun-slinging father, nobody, not even Buck Brady or Mary, who too knew now that Cal Brady hadn't been very much of a man, found any cause to comment, when in the simple way of praise, the frock-coated minister said:

"He was a Brady. He lived, fought, and died like one."

And Buck Brady knew, knew full well, what it had cost Cal Brady to stay behind, to chain himself to that tree. And his eyes were sad in after years when he visited the graves of the two Bradys—father and son. In his heart, Buck Brady knew that Cal was a Brady, a fighting Brady, who'd done a job with the biggest odds ever stacked against a gent.

The folks in Sierra Blanca took the word of Mary Brady, that Cal Brady had discovered that his brother, Buck Brady, had been framed and unjustly, thrown into prison. And they looked at the locket, taken in that stage robbery, that was found on the dead Pinto as proof. Not that any proof was needed. A Brady had told them!

John G. Pearsol will be back next month!

THE RIDER

By Walt Coburn
(Author of "The Buzzard's Shadow," etc.)

An Unforgetable Novelette of the Cow Country

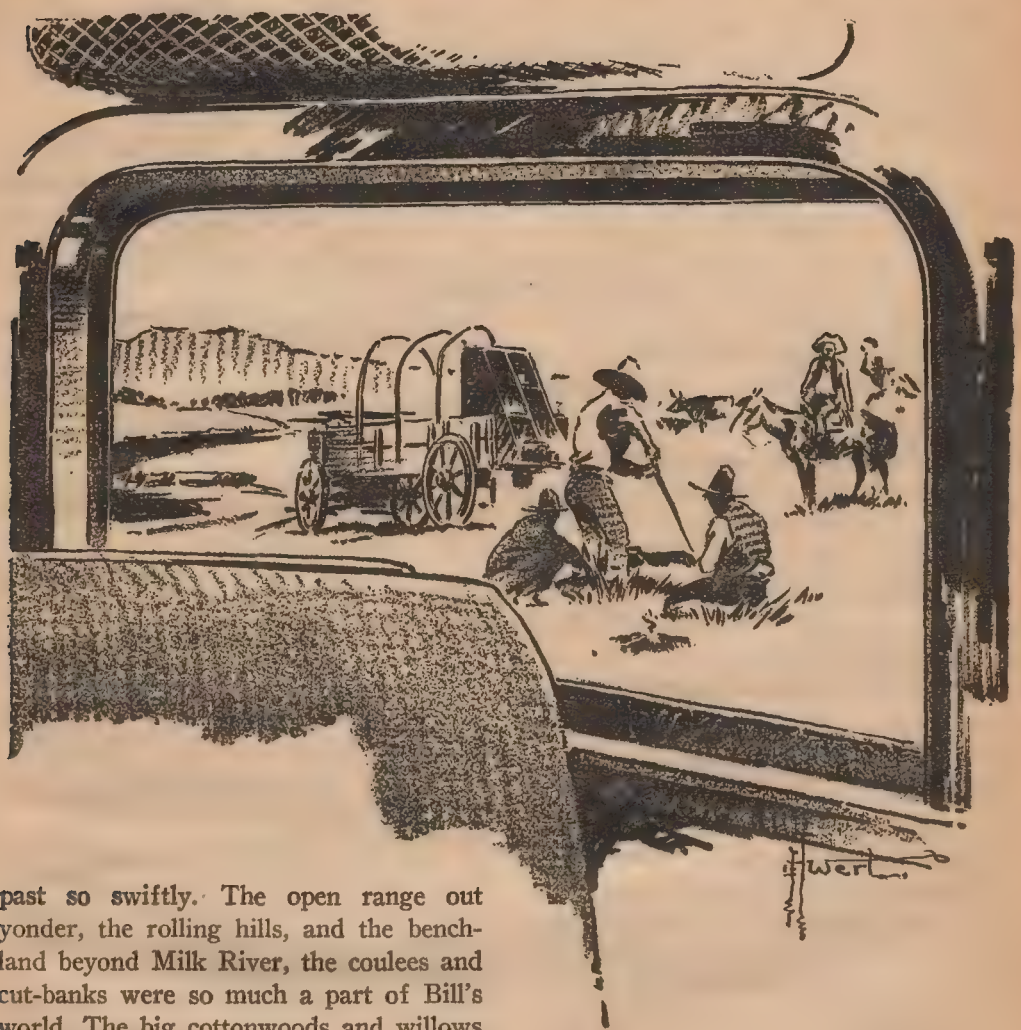
Bill Tillery, so they said, was dead, burned to a cinder in the flaming wreck of a railroad coach. Yet one man spread the story of seeing him ride again, his face badly scarred, his eyes dark with hatred, bent on an almost hopeless mission for the dead man who had taken his place in boothill!

THE train out of Chinook, Montana, picked up speed. On one of the red plush seats in the day coach, Bill Tillery sat handcuffed to a burly deputy. The deputy was talking to him unpleasantly.

"Sure goin' to be a pleasant train ride, Tillery, the deputy said. "Sittin' here handcuffed to you all the way to Deer Lodge ain't what I'd call pleasure. Wish there was some way of chainin' you to the seat. If you wasn't so damned ornery I could take off the handcuffs and be comfortable instead of sittin' up all night hobbled to you. But I'm warnin' you that if I doze off when night come and you make a play that ain't right, I'll bend a gun barrel over your head. No monkey business on this trip."

Bill Tillery did not seem to hear the big deputy. He was looking out the car window, watching the country that slipped

FROM BOOTHILL



past so swiftly. The open range out yonder, the rolling hills, and the bench-land beyond Milk River, the coulees and cut-banks were so much a part of Bill's world. The big cottonwoods and willows along the river where cattle were grazing, the occasional rider or two, gathering cattle or making an afternoon circle had all been Bill's life. Bill Tillery belonged out there with those cowboys, out there under the blue sky, instead of on this train that was taking him to State's Prison at Deer Lodge.

The train passed a round-up camp, there on the bank of Milk River. A hard lump choked the throat of Bill Tillery and his eyes smarted as he stared out the window, watching the round-up camp. The mess wagon and mess tent, the bed wagon and rope corral were grouped close together. Beyond them the remuda was grazing. And across yonder a bunch of cattle were being held up by riders near a branding fire. Two ropers were dragging calves up to be flanked and branded.

That was the Half Circle T outfit—the outfit Bill Tillery had worked with, up until a month ago. Bill Tillery had been top hand with the outfit. He thought he could recognize some of the riders. One of the cowboys at the branding fire took off his hat and waved it. Others did the

same. Bill Tillery wondered if they knew he was on the train—if they were waving good-bye to him. His eyes felt hot. His mouth was dry as cotton. Then the train rounded a curve and the round-up was lost to sight. . . .

"Goin' to send me an invitation to your hangin', Tillery?" asked the big deputy.

Bill Tillery turned his head. His eyes, a mixture of brown and gray, were narrowed, hard. "Damn you, shut up." His voice was harsh, unsteady.

The leering grin was wiped off the joweled, red-veined face of the big deputy. And his right hand dropped to the butt of his six-shooter.

"Don't get tough, Tillery, or I'll bust your damned skull wide open. I'd be glad of a chance to do it."

"I wouldn't be exactly idle while you was tryin' it, mister. I'd as soon die here on this train as be hung. And while you was crackin' my skull I might be workin' some on you. You keep that big mouth of yours shut and keep your gun in its holster."

BILL TILLERY again turned to the window, watching the passing landscape. His mouth was a bitter, twisted line. The *clickety-clack, clickety-clack* of the rails were marking off the miles that were lessening between him and the gates of the prison. The sound pounded against his ear drums.

The big deputy took a drink from the flask of whiskey he had fetched along.

Some of the passengers stared boldly at the law officer and his handcuffed prisoner. Women whispered to one another. A small boy paused in the aisle, an apple in his hand, staring at the prisoner with wide eyes. Then his mother yanked him back into his seat and boxed his ears. Bill Tillery grinned mirthlessly.

He was calloused to staring people now, having endured the ordeal during his brief trial. But he hated them all these people who stood around staring at him as if he were a vicious animal that had to be chained and caged behind steel bars. Inwardly he cursed them bitterly.

His wrists were handcuffed together. A short steel chain fastened him to the heavy-shouldered, bull-necked deputy. Now the conductor collected the tickets. He, too, stared at Bill Tillery. Then he spoke to the deputy, as he punched the ticket and shoved the stub down into the hatband of the law officer's big Stetson.

"Another one goin' up to make horsehair bridles, eh Butch?"

"He's stretchin' rope," the deputy boasted. "This is Bill Tillery—the feller that killed the Half Circle T wagon-boss."

"The hell!"

Bill Tillery kept staring out the window. The words of the conductor and deputy thudded against his brain, like the pounding of tiny hammers, like the *clickety-clack* of the rails.

The conductor passed on. Then the news-butcher came along with his fruit and candy and peanuts and newspapers. The big deputy bought three copies of the newspaper when he saw his name mentioned in the headlines that said Bill Tillery was sentenced to hang and that Deputy Sheriff Butch Brown, who had made the arrest, was taking the prisoner to the State Prison. It mentioned something regarding the record of the deputy as a fearless peace officer; how he had, in line of duty, killed three men. Butch Brown seemed visibly to swell as he held the paper so that Bill Tillery could see it.

"You dirty glory hunter," said Bill Tillery flatly, and turned his head back to face the window.

Then the big deputy led his prisoner to the smoking car. They had to pass through three coaches. Butch Brown was putting on a parade. The tall, wide-shouldered prisoner did not change ex-

pression as he passed along the aisle.

Bill Tillery was still in his twenties. The month in jail had robbed his square-jawed, strong-featured face of its deep tan. He wore overalls and flannel shirt and a cowboy jumper of blue denim. His boots were shop made, new. His Stetson hat was service worn, but not shapeless. He looked older than his years.

In the smoking car Butch Brown made the most of his notoriety. He talked with the men across the aisle. Bottles passed back and forth. Cigar smoke thickened. Bill Tillery's hot eyes stared out into the gathering dusk.

The lights came on. Then it was pitch dark outside and it had begun to rain. The rain beat heavily against the car window. They ate in the dining car. It was just another parade for Butch Brown. Then they came back to the smoking car and the two men across the aisle came over to start a poker game, Bill Tillery did not join them.

"I'd as soon play with a rattlesnake as with this big hunk of rotten meat," he told the two men, one of whom was a gambler, the other a bartender.

Hours dragged along; mile after mile; *clickety-clack;* as the train roared on through the heavy storm. The poker game continued. Bill Tillery dozed.

Then it came—the crash—all in a few seconds, catapulting passengers from their seats. The car overturned, crashing, splintered. Twisted steel and seats were smashed to kindling wood and flames began licking at the cars, making the wrecked coaches an inferno. The darkness was blacker beyond the flames. The screams of the crippled and dying imprisoned in the twisted wreckage. . . .

BILL TILLERY was knocked out for a minute or so. He came to, half stunned, dizzy, his senses numbed. He felt stabs of pain in his face and body. Flames lighted up the wreckage. All around there in that darkness and chaos that was torn by yellow flames that threw an unreal light into the night, there came the groans and screams and cries for help from injured men.

Bill Tillery tugged with both hands at the limp form of the big deputy. Then a flicker of light showed Butch Brown's face. It was a mangled mass of flesh. Bill Tillery, his eyes half blinded by blood, worked feverishly. He found the deputy's keys and unlocked the handcuffs that held his swollen wrists. Blood from his badly lacerated head kept getting in his eyes as he worked. But he kept at it, rifling the deputy's pockets of money, taking his cartridge belt and gun while the flames licked at him like snake tongues. Pinned under the wreckage nearby, was the gambler who had been playing poker with the deputy. The man was dead, almost decapitated. Bill Tillery went about the grisly business of going through the dead gambler's pockets. A well-filled bill-fold and some loose currency rewarded him. Bill would need money—and these dead men would have no use now for the money he was taking from their pockets. Just the same it was an ugly job and damned distasteful.

As the flames got closer, Bill Tillery clicked the handcuffs on the wrists of the dead gambler, linking him thus to the dead law officer. Then he fought his way through the flaming wreckage out into the welcome blackness that was filled with pouring rain.

All around him sounded cries for help and the screams of injured men, women and children. Three coaches and the engine had been derailed and wrecked. No man could resist those terrible calls for help. Grimly, risking that freedom which fate had thrust upon him, Bill Tillery went to work, even as other men were feverishly, desperately working.

He brought out women and children and three or four injured men. The flames seared his face that seemed a mass of pain. His clothes were too rain-soaked to catch fire.

By sheer luck he found one of the fire axes that are part of the car equipment. He chopped through the wreckage, dragged out the trapped people he set free. The rain was washing the blood out of his eyes. He worked like a madman while the others helped him clear away the wreckage. The injured and dead were being carried back to the coaches that had not been derailed. The smoking car and one day coach were a mass of flames now, too far gone to allow any rescuing of injured or dead. The screams of the doomed passengers was a horrible thing, there in that rain filled night in the mountains.

The last terrible scream was silenced by death. The rescue work was done. The conductor was trying to get a count of the passengers. Bill Tillery handed his axe to a man and wondered why the man stared at him so strangely, almost recoiling. Had the fellow recognized him as the condemned Bill Tillery? He left the man standing there in the wierd reflection of the burning cars, the fire axe in his hand, his face twisted and white as if he had seen something horrible.

"Reckon he figgered I was goin' to kill him," thought Bill Tillery, his mouth twisting bitterly. He made for the timbered slope beyond the firelight. Then the rain-filled night hid him. He stumbled on in the darkness. Fate, in the grim garb of a train wreck, had set him free. But it had also made him a fugitive. He was to be a hunted man from now on.

ONE of his legs pained from thigh to ankle. He limped badly. His head felt dizzy, his brain was in a red whirl. He kept on doggedly, desperately. He had to put miles between himself and the wrecked train.

The country was rough, mountainous. He kept bumping into trees or falling over rocks. It was tough going. Now and then when brush whipped his face, the pain of it made him sick. Groans were choked behind his clenched teeth. The going became torturous. His leg was getting worse. At last he crawled into the shelving shelter of a rimrock and lay down, exhausted. Blackness swept through his brain. Unconsciousness claimed him.

It was daylight when he awoke. The storm had cleared and the sun was an hour high in the blue sky. Slowly, painfully, Bill Tillery moved. His left leg was stiff with pain. Then he saw that the leg of his overalls was badly torn and caked with blood. Investigation showed an ugly gash in his thigh and a badly bruised knee and leg. His face was throbbing with pain. He felt of it gingerly. The touch of his hand gave him stabs of pain. His nose was so stopped with caked blood that he had to breath through his mouth. His lips were cut and puffed. One of his eyes were closed. His forehead and scalp were badly cut.

The country around him was mountainous, rough going for a crippled man. But he couldn't stay here and starve.

He found a heavy stick that served him as a cane and set out on his painful journey. He had no idea where he might be. But he had money in his pocket and a six-shooter and his freedom. He'd gamble on his chances from here on.

All that day he dragged himself over the rough country. Pain had taken away any hunger that he might have felt, but he was thirsty. He found occasional pools of water left by the heavy rain in hollow rocks and drained them to the last drop.

That night he found a sort of shelter in a small natural cave. But he slept badly, fitfully, his slumber torn by nightmarish

dreams, his body tortured with pain.

It was not until after sundown the next day that he stumbled down a trail through the scrub pines to a small ranch on the bank of a creek.

A squaw was getting a pail of water when he limped up. The bucket of water slipped from her hand as she stared at him. Then she called out something in her own language in a shrill, high pitched voice. A bearded man showed in the doorway of the log cabin, a rifle in his hand. But he did not raise the gun. He just stood there for a minute, staring. Then he called out.

"God, man, what's happened to you? God, what's clawed your face thataway? Grizzly?"

He came from the cabin with long legged strides. He had on a dirty buckskin shirt and moccasins and greasy canvas pants. But he was not an Indian or 'breed. His hair and beard were yellow. His eyes were greenish blue.

"Grizzly," nodded Bill Tillery, taking his cue from the bearded man's words. "Killed my horse and damned near got me."

He wondered how badly he had been hurt by the splintered glass and wood of the wrecked coach. He had not long to wonder. The bearded squawman took him inside and pointed to a mirror on the wall. The sight of his own face made Bill Tillery shudder. Scarcely an inch of it that was not ripped. His nose was broken, swollen. One eye was discolored, swollen shut. There were ugly cuts on his scalp and forehead—and one cut that ran from the top of his ear along his jaw to his chin.

CHAPTER TWO

The Unknown Hero

THE squaw-man brought out a jug of corn whiskey. The stuff was almost colorless and it was fiery, raw. But to Bill Tillery it was good medicine. They drank together from tin cups while the fat squaw heated water and fussed around making some sort of poultice of roots and leaves.

"The old woman knows what she's doin'," said the squaw-man. "You ain't the first she's 'tended to. Throw another drink into you."

The cabin was fairly clean. It had a couple of bunks and a table and three homemade chairs. The dirt floor was hard-packed, swept. The stove was an old round-up stove that had been repaired. A couple of kiack boxes in the corner were packed. The cabin had the appearance of being neglected. As if it had not been lived in for some time.

"Me and the old woman are just camped here," explained the squaw-man. "This ain't our place." His greenish eyes, shifty, suspicious, kept watching Bill Tillery.

"Fix me up and I'll pay you for the trouble, mister," Bill said. "This damned face of mine is in bad shape."

"The old woman will 'tend to it," the man told him. "She's handy thataway. It's twenty-five thirty miles to town to the doctor. You kin git fixed up here enough to stand the trip to town."

The squaw poulticed his face, wrapping it in a crude bandage made from a clean dish towel. She and the bearded man talked in the Indian language except when he cursed her in English.

So began Bill Tillery's stay at the little ranch in the mountains. The squaw-man said his name was Jake Arnold and that he was a trapper. He was from Canada and the squaw was Sarcee. He had gotten into some trouble up there, peddling moonshine to the Sarcees and was in Montana for a few months until the trouble died down. Then he'd go back into the Peace River country with his traps. Bill Tillery told himself that the

man was not telling all the truth. He didn't like Arnold's eyes. And there was something in the attitude of the stolid squaw that puzzled him.

Bill Tillery knew that Jake Arnold did not believe the story about the grizzly. Because that strong poultice had drawn out slivers of wood and glass from his face and head. The squaw had pulled out the splinters with a pair of Indian-made tweezers.

Then a few days later Jake Arnold saddled up and took a pack horse to get grub and a jug of whiskey. He wasn't going to town. There was a trading store across the ridge about ten miles. Jake Arnold was gone nearly two days. When he returned he fetched some newspapers that gave a graphic description of the train wreck. He set the jug on the table and dropped the newspapers beside it. There was a cunning glint in his green-gray eyes. He was half drunk and cussed the squaw as she lugged in the laden kiack boxes and the blankets and sougans Bill Tillery had told him to buy for him.

"That was shore some wreck, Smith," he said, spreading out one of the newspapers. Bill Tillery had told Arnold that his name was Bill Smith.

"Anybody killed?" asked the injured man whose one puffed eye showed like a bloodshot slit from the bandages. His other eye was still closed, bandaged. His voice sounded muffled through the bandages.

"Eight, all told. Among 'em was that feller Bill Tillery that was sentenced to hang. Him and the deputy with him was both killed. Burned to death. They find what's left of their bodies handcuffed together. Well, that beat hangin', I reckon. And from what the boys was sayin' at the tradin' post that Butch Brown was the kind of gent that would shoot a man in the back to build up a rep. Let's have a drink, Smith. You kin read the papers while I'm tendin' to the horses. There's a whole evenin's readin' in 'em. All about what the conductor and the passengers has to say about it and so on."

WHEN Jake Arnold had left the cabin, Bill Tillery picked up one of the papers that had been folded over on the second page. On that page it gave the story of one of the passengers who told of a man with a horribly lacerated and battered face who had been somewhat of a hero, chopping through the wreckage. He had handed the axe over to this man who gave the reporters his story. Other passengers also told of seeing this man with a face that was a mass of blood, rescuing passengers. It was largely due to his cool headedness and bravery that many of the injured and trapped passengers had been saved. But the man had vanished. The theory was that he must have made one final effort to extricate more of the passengers in the burning smoking car, and had been trapped by the flames. The passengers sang the praises of this unknown hero.

The opposite page was devoted to the story of the tragic fate of Deputy Sheriff Butch Brown and his prisoner Bill Tillery.

Bill Tillery laid down the paper—the paper that had been folded back to that account of the man with the blood-smeared face.

That night Jake Arnold got pretty drunk. He read aloud the different accounts in the paper.

"Listen to this 'un, Smith," he said in his unpleasant voice, his bloodshot eyes watching the injured man. "A Butte bartender that is in the hospital with two busted legs tells how he and his pardner, a gambler, was playin' poker with that deputy when the wreck happened. He crawled out somehow but his pardner never made it. He was killed or burned

to death. And the hell of it is that this gamblin' man had a bankroll. Twenty thousand dollars in cash. They was comin' back from Chicago to buy a saloon in Butte. The gambler's name was Oren Palmer. They ain't found a trace of him in the burned wreckage. He must have burned to ashes. This saloon feller is shore bemoanin' the loss of that bankroll. Imagine twenty thousand dollars goin' up in smoke. I'd feel sorrowful myself. Drink up, Smith." There was a leering grin on his bearded lips.

Bill Tillery knew that Jake Arnold suspected him. Arnold was a man with a crooked, crafty brain. The bear story had not held water. But Bill was going to let the squaw-man make all the moves in the game. He was glad when Arnold put away the papers in one of the kiack boxes and began to get ready for bed. Bill Tillery hobbled out to the tepee the squaw had put up for him the first day he was in camp here.

Painfully he pulled off his boots and mended overalls. He rolled up the overalls and used them for a pillow. He slid his six-shooter under the blankets.

Twenty thousand dollars! That was money. He hadn't even thought to open the wallet with the heavy elastic band around it. He'd been using the money that was loose in his pocket—Butch Brown's money—to pay for the grub and blankets Jake Arnold had fetched from town. But there was twenty thousand dollars—if the saloon man told the truth—in that wallet he carried in the pocket of his mended overalls. And somehow he knew that the cunning brain of the squaw-man had suspected him of having that money.

THE little tepee was pitched about a hundred feet from the cabin. It was a regular Indian tepee made of canvas, wrapped around lodge poles. A small, oval opening served as a door, and there was no way of fastening the flap. Bill Tillery slept with his feet towards the opening and his gun near his hand. Men of Jake Arnold's breed would kill a man for much less than twenty thousand dollars.

The dull pain in his leg and the pains in his lacerated face made sound sleep impossible. That pain, added to his suspicions of Jake Arnold, made his slumber light, fitful. So he was wide awake, there in the darkness, when the faint scrape of canvas told him that the flap across the tepee opening had been lifted back.

Tense as a coiled rattler, Bill Tillery lay there, his gun in his hand. Then the intruder tripped and lost his balance, almost falling.

"What the hell?" growled Bill Tillery, as if just waking. "Who's there? Want a shot in the guts?"

"Don't shoot, Smith!" There was fear in the squaw-man's voice.

"What do you want, Jake?"

"Just fetched you a drink, Smith. Night cap." His voice was thick with whiskey. Unsteady.

"I had all the whiskey I wanted, there at the cabin." Bill Tillery pulled a match across the canvas side of the tepee. In its quick yellow flare he caught a glimpse of the hunting knife in the squaw-man's hand before the man could shove it into its sheath fastened to the Hudson's Bay sash he wore around his middle.

The bloodshot green-gray eyes of the bearded man glittered in the match flare. Bill Tillery touched the flame to the candle wick. And the candle light showed the gun in his right hand. The gun carelessly covered Arnold.

"If I was you, Jake," said Bill Tillery, "I'd go on back to bed and sleep off that jag. You've had too much tanglefoot for one night. See you in the mornin'."

"Drunker'n I thought I was, Smith. See you in the mornin'." He backed out of

the tepee and let down the flap. Bill Tillery blew out the flickering candle flame and lay back. Beneath the heavy bandages, he grinned faintly. Then he tried to think out things. There was no two ways about it—Bill Tillery was in a tight. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Gambler's Girl

THE first thing that Bill Tillery did in the gray dawn was to slip the broad rubber band from the thick wallet. It was packed with banknotes of large denomination. The smallest was a twenty dollar bill. He didn't bother to count it. There was money enough in that wallet—plenty of it.

There were a couple of compartments in the wallet. He opened the smaller one and found two frayed letters and a photograph of a girl. There in the first light of dawn he stared at the picture—a picture of a girl with thick wavy curls and large, dark eyes and a smile that did something to Bill Tillery's heart.

The photograph had been cut from what was probably a larger picture. It was just the size of a playing card which the gambler had ingeniously fastened across it with a little rubber band to protect it.

It was the picture of a girl of probably sixteen, in a uniform such as convent girls wear. Bill Tillery kept staring at the picture. Never had he seen a girl like this. Eyes that were soft, trusting, a smile that went straight to a man's heart, were set against that background of heavy curls and the white collar and plain black blouse of the convent uniform.

He covered the picture again with the playing card, noting that it was the queen of hearts. Then, his hands unsteady, he unfolded one of the frayed letters. He felt as guilty as if he were committing a felony. But he had to know. He had to know about this convent youngster and what she meant to the dead gambler. The hanwriting was the round, precise lettering of a girl.

> Oren Dear:
>
> The Christmas box and money came yesterday, the day before Christmas. I opened the box on this, Christmas morning. And it was so wonderful I cried like a baby. I know you always told me never to cry but I couldn't help it. You are the most wonderful person in this whole big world. And I am the happiest girl alive. Oren, I pray every night and morning for you. . . .

A faint noise sounded outside. Quickly Bill Tillery hid the letter and wallet under the blanket.

"The old woman," said the squaw-man, opening the tepee flap, and shoving his bearded face inside, "said breakfast is about ready. Better git dressed."

THIS day marked the beginning of a fresh menace—Jack Arnold and his knife. While the squaw-man owned a rifle and shotgun and a six-shooter, the only weapon he ever carried was this whetted hunting knife with a stag horn handle. He carried it in an Indian-made sheath and would amuse himself throwing it at a mark made on the trunk of a pine tree. He could throw the knife with incredible speed and uncanny accuracy.

After a breakfast of flapjacks and meat and potatoes and strong black coffee, he stood out in front of the cabin and began his target practice. He was still partly drunk and his bloodshot eyes were ugly, crafty.

He would throw underhand, then overhand. He was ambidexterous and would use first the right, then the left hand. Sometimes the throw would be a full arm swing that would bury the heavy blade inches deep in the trunk of the tree, the steel quivering. And behind each throw was force enough to drive the heavy knife through the body of a man.

Then there would be the slightest flip of the muscular wrist and the swift flash of steel would leave the point of the blade buried only an inch or so in the pine tree.

Then he would throw the knife over his right or left shoulder with devilish accuracy—while Bill Tillery, his right hand never far from his gun, watched, smoking, silent.

That day and the next and for ten days more that target practice continued. Jake Arnold was always a little drunk, always whetting the knife and throwing it. The conversation between the two men lessened, day by day, until they seldom exchanged words any words at all. And the stolid squaw, padding about on moccasined feet, cooked the meals and cared for Bill Tillery's wounds.

Nights Bill Tillery slept with his gun in his hand. Days he was always wary. He no longer made a pretence at drinking with the squaw-man, or even talking with him. By their silence each man measured the other. There became a wordless enmity between the two men.

One day Jake Arnold went to the trading store for more grub and whiskey. Bill Tillery took the opportunity to give the squaw fifty dollars.

"Hide it from Jake," he said. "That's your money. You earned it."

For the first time, then, he heard her speak English. She spoke not in the broken dialect of the 'breed,' but in carefully learned mission English taught by the Jesuit fathers in Canada.

"I can not use money," she told him. "He won't let me go to town. You keep it. Some day you send it to the Mission at St. Paul's in the Little Rockies to buy things for my baby. He is six years old now. I left him there when Arnold had to run away from Canada. He made me come with him. He wanted to kill the baby because it was too small to travel fast. He is a devil, that Arnold. He wants to kill you. Your face is almost healed now but do not let him know. And do not throw away your crutch. Make him think it will take a long time yet to get well. One night he will get too drunk to watch. You steal his horse and get away. Jake Arnold is a bad man. He has killed two trappers with that knife. Some day he will kill me. I do not care. I can never go back to my own people because they hate me for running away with him. Perhaps to-night he will come home very drunk. You can steal his horse. Send the money to the Mission. There is a father there who will understand. You leave here before Jake Arnold throws that knife at your back. I do not want to dig any more graves."

JAKE ARNOLD returned to camp drunk. He cursed the squaw as she unloaded the pack horse. His bloodshot eyes glared at Bill Tillery who sat outside the cabin on a bench, there in the sunset. Bill Tillery's face was still heavily bandaged. He had kept up the pretence of the crutch long before the squaw had mentioned it that day, even as he had taken care that the squaw-man had not gotten a single glimpse of his scarred face since it had been a horrible raw thing of shredded skin and flesh. Bill Tillery knew that his face was almost healed, thanks to the remarkable ministrations of the Sarcee squaw, and he had planned on doing just what the squaw had suggested.

After all, who would believe the story of a drunken renegade squaw-man who claimed that Bill Tillery was alive? Now he knew why Arnold never went near town. He was wanted for murder in Canada. The Mounties would be trailing him. Some day they would catch up, perhaps. Canadian justice is swift, accurate. Jake Arnold would hang.

Arnold took a jug from the pack and

pulled the cork with his big yellow teeth. He was unsteady on his long legs. He lifted the jug with both hands and drank, gulping the raw whiskey down as if it were water.

The squaw was lifting one of the raw-hide-covered boxes from the pack saddle. The pack horse suddenly whirled, kicking, as his tail, switching flies, caught under a loose rope end. His hoofs grazed Jake Arnold, one shod hoof smashing the jug from the grimy hands.

Jake Arnold reeled backwards, the upper part of the broken brown jug in his hands. With a snarling curse he threw the broken part of the jug at the squaw and his right hand dropped to his knife. Murder was in his bloodshot eyes. The squaw did not move. Just stood there. It all took place in split seconds.

Bill Tillery's leap was as swift as that of a cougar. His gun barrel smashed the squaw-man's wrist, sending the heavy bladed knife spinning. Then the barrel of the gun caught Jake Arnold across the head, above the ear, dropping him. The bearded man lay there on the ground in a limp heap, with blood oozing from the scalp wound between his ear and temple.

Bill Tillery picked up the pack rope and tied the squaw-man's legs and arms. The man's right wrist was broken. Then Bill picked up the knife and turned to the squaw.

"I'm takin' this pig sticker along," he said. "He's through usin' it. You pack what things you need and pull out for that mission where your kid is. At the first town you come to, send the law after this murderin' snake. They'll turn him over to the Canadian law. He needs hangin'. He was goin' to kill you."

"You go away now," said the squaw, her voice guttural, flat toned, lifeless. "This is your chance. Give me the knife. I stay with him. You go. Go now."

"What do you aim to do? Stay here?"

"That is the only thing to do. My people do not want me. I stay with him."

"He'll kill you if you let him loose."

"What does that matter?"

There was something terribly final about her voice that silenced Bill Tillery. Her dark eyes were fathomless, her brown face stolid, without expression. He wondered if she cared for that filthy, drunken, black-hearted knife man. Perhaps. Indian women are hard for a white man to understand.

"I'll send money and a letter to the St. Paul's Mission," he told her as he handed her the knife. He felt awkward, ill at ease, in the presence of this squaw.

He mounted Jake Arnold's horse and rode away. Just before he came to the edge of the timber he looked back over his shoulder. The squaw was bent over, cutting free the ropes that bound the squaw-man. Using the whetted hunting knife. She did not look up. Bill Tillery rode on into the timber.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Man's Money

THE bandages came off, revealing a scarred face, the lower part hidden by a month's growth of beard. Bill Tillery hit the Outlaw Trail and followed it down into New Mexico. Sun and wind hardened the tender skin of his face. He kept his whiskers cut as short as possible with a pair of scissors he had picked up at one of the outlaw camps. He changed his name almost as often as he changed his shirt. And no man in the cow country would ever have recognized this scar-faced man as the Bill Tillery who was supposed to be dead.

After a fashion the scars blurred under the coat of tan. His skin under the black bristle of his jaw became toughened enough to permit the use of a razor. Save for

the long scar from his ear to near the corner of his mouth, his face was not badly disfigured. But the healing of the wounds had completely changed the looks of the fugitive, without making him in any way repulsive. There were streaks of white in his thick black hair where the scalp wounds had healed.

This was the Bill Tillery, who under the name of Bill Jones, hired out to a cow outfit along the Border between Arizona and Mexico, working for forty dollars a month and carrying a wallet that contained twenty thousand dollars in cash.

In that wallet was the picture of a convent girl and two badly worn letters from her to the dead gambler Oren Palmer. Neither letter bore a date or the address of the sender. Youngster-like, the girl had neglected those details. She had signed the letters "With bunches of love, Doris."

The letters gave Bill Tillery no clue as to her relationship towards the dead gambler. Sister? Niece? What? The two letters were just the sort of ones a girl would write home from school. They told of her grades in different subjects, her music, her schoolmates, the nuns who taught her. She had spoken several times of a Sister Cecilia. But there was no mention of the name of the school. Sister Cecelia taught music. According to Doris, the nun had the voice of an angel.

One thing was evident. The girl did not know that Oren Palmer had been a gambler. She mentioned his mines in Mexico.

Over and over Bill Tillery read those letters. For long minutes at a time, when he was alone, he would study the photograph of the convent girl, Doris. This twenty thousand dollars belonged to that youngster. It was up to him to find her and send her that money he had taken from the pocket of the dead gambler. He would find some way of returning it without her knowing from whom it came. He thought of many ways of giving her the money—ways of covering the real facts. And always, wherever there was a Sisters' schools for girls, he would try to find out if a girl named Doris who answered the right description, was in school there. Two or three times he dogged curiosity had almost caused trouble. The good sisters were suspicious of cowboys with scarred faces and six-shooters. It was a mighty discouraging search. But Bill Tillery was not quitting.

Also in this wallet he carried a newspaper clipping. It was from a Montana paper and some inspired reporter had written a column concerning a rumor that the man Bill Tillery had not perished in the train wreck, but was now riding with the renegades who followed the Outlaw Trail. It was quite an article but the reporter explained that there was no definite proof, that it was simply one of many tales that drift out of the badlands into cow camps and eventually into town to be picked up by some reporter hunting news bits.

So Bill Tillery sang to the night herd and made plans of sending the twenty thousand dollars to a youngster named Doris.

And from Montana word was sent out to various sheriffs throughout the cow country to watch out for a man with a badly scarred face. There was a rumor that Bill Tillery was alive. If so, there was a reward to be paid for his capture.

Fate quickly destroyed Bill Tillery's plans. In Nogales, Mexico, he met, face to face, almost within touching distance, Jake Arnold. Jake Arnold was minus the matted yellow hair and beard. He was shaved clean save for a yellow moustache and his hair was carefully trimmed. But there could be no mistaking those green-gray eyes. Jake Arnold, dressed in a

suit of town clothes and wearing a clean shirt and a tie, standing at the bar with a glass of tequila in his hand looked like a different man. His hand moved a little stiffly as he lifted his glass because the wrist had been broken and badly set.

This was Nogales, Mexico. A far cry from the Peace River country in Canada where Jake Arnold was wanted for murder. And by the same token a long ways from Chinook, Montana, where Bill Tillery had been tried and sentenced to hang for the killing of the Half Circle T wagon boss. The eyes of the two men met—and held for a long moment. Then Jake Arnold spoke, his voice low pitched.

"Long time no see you, Tillery."

"You trailed me here, Arnold?" countered Bill Tillery.

"Mebby yes. Mebby no. Anyhow you're here. So am I. I don't reckon there's a man on earth except me that could point you out as Bill Tillery. I recognized you by a cross shaped scar on your forehead. You and the squaw out-foxed me by you keepin' on them bandages. But that scar give you away. I read your brand right."

"And what do you aim to do about it, Arnold?"

"I need money. Ten thousand dollars. My cut of the twenty thousand you got off a gambler named Oren Palmer."

"And supposin' I don't pay off?"

"At the far end of the bar stands a law officer," Arnold said softly. "If the law nabs you now you'll be charged with the double murder of Butch Brown and the Oren Palmer gambler. You'll hang. And I'll collect the six-bits they will pay me in bounty money. I'll give you till midnight to dig up that ten thousand dollars. Meet me here. And Tillery, don't try to rabbit on me. I'll be watchin' every move you make."

Jake Arnold downed his drink and left the saloon. Bill Tillery slowly sipped his beer. Jake Arnold had spoken no less than the truth when he claimed to be the only man who could identify him as Bill Tillery, fugitive. And Arnold was cunning enough to keep that secret to himself.

But what about the squaw? What had happened to her. She alone could prove that Jake Arnold was a murderer. And Bill Tillery was almost certain that Arnold had killed her. He had seen the staghorn handle of the heavy hunting knife in its sheath beneath the squaw-man's left armpit. Bill Tillery told himself that the big knife had taken another life. That with the squaw dead, the Peace River country would forever hold its black secret buried under its winter snow drifts.

It was six hours until midnight when Jake Arnold demanded that he be paid off. And this was Mexico, south of the Border. Bill Tillery finished his beer and walked outside. His horse had been left at a Mexican feed corral. It was getting dusk. In an hour or so he might be able to get his horse and quit town. But there was always that menace of Jake Arnold's knife. Arnold would be watching him, trailing him. And a thrown knife is silent. In Bill Tillery's pocket was that filled wallet with money that he had sworn to turn over to the convent girl named Doris.

JAKE ARNOLD was a murderer who needed killing. It was no crime to kill a man like Arnold, so the cowboy faced his facts calmly, sanely. He must kill Jake Arnold. His own life was at stake. He had done no real wrong. The killing for which he had been tried and sentenced to hang, up there in Montana, was one of which he was wholly innocent. The Half Circle T foreman had been killed at the line camp where Bill Tillery had been wintering cattle. The two had quarreled a few weeks before and Bill Tillery had beaten up the foreman and had taken the latter's gun away from him. One

evening Bill Tillery had returned to his line camp to find the foreman dead in the cabin. Bill Tillery's own six-shooter was near the dead body. And three Half Circle T cowboys rode up as Bill Tillery stood there, the gun with three empty shells in the chambers, gripped in his hand. So the law had convicted Bill Tillery. The law demanded a life for a life.

And now Jake Arnold had threatened him. It was his life or the life of Jake Arnold. Bill Tillery loosened the six-shooter in the waistband of his overalls. He'd meet Arnold at midnight and it would be a question of speed between a six-shooter and a hunting knife. Death would claim the slow man.

His wandering was rather aimless. He had no taste for saloons or the cantinas with their Mexican music and dancers. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts. So it was that his way led to the edge of town, into the twilight—and out of that twilight, from an old adobe, there came the sound of singing. A voice that was like the voice of an angel was singing a little Mexican folk song. And through the open doorway of the old adobe dwelling Bill Tillery could see a nun and some Mexican children. She was sewing in the lamplight. She had the face of a madonna. When her song was finished the children gathered around her.

"Another song, please, Sister Cecelia! One more little song!" They pleaded, clapping small brown hands.

They sang another song, and Bill Tillery in the rough garb of a cowboy, stood in the doorway. He took off his hat as the black clad nun looked up at him from her seat on a crude bench. Her smile welcomed him. The dozen or more youngsters eyed him curiously, in silence.

"I am looking for a Sister Cecelia," said Bill Tillery, rather ill at ease. He had found many sisters of that name. But there was always hope. He awkwardly showed her the picture of the girl Doris. Something like a shadow passed across the dark face of the Mexican nun.

"Where did you get this, señor?" she asked in careful English.

"It's too long a story to tell just now," he said. "Do you know this little girl?"

"Yes. . . . Yes. But this picture is years old. And the little girl is a young lady. She is a nurse at the hospital. Are you Oren Palmer?"

"No, ma'am. Oren Palmer is dead—killed in a train wreck up in Montana. He . . . left some money. I reckon it belongs to the girl named Doris."

"Doris Palmer—Oren Palmer's young sister." The nun hesitated. "He is dead? I wondered why we never heard from him again. I'll be through here in an hour. This is my little school. The children were orphaned by the last revolution. Will you be kind enough to wait? Then I'll take you to the hospital. Doris will be off duty. You can talk with her."

Bill Tillery shook his head. He felt ill at ease in the presence of this woman with the saintly face and eyes that were dark mirrors of sorrow. He handed her the filled wallet, and with it went his last chance of buying Jake Arnold's secrecy.

"This was in Oren Palmer's pocket when he was killed. I . . . I took it. Please give it to the girl Doris. But if you don't mind, I'd like to keep her picture."

He picked up the picture and put it in the pocket of his flannel shirt. Then he turned and left the old adobe building, his spurs jingling. The nun and the Mexican children watched him leave. The nun held the filled wallet in her hand. She opened it slowly, her dark eyes widening as she saw the banknotes. It was more money than she had ever seen or ever expected to see. And it had been given to her by a cowboy with a scarred face and a big six-shooter shoved in the waist-

band of his saddle-warped overalls. To her it was something like a miracle. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Rendezvous With Death

FROM the black shadows against the wall of the old adobe a pair of green-gray eyes had watched. A pair of keen ears had listened. And the shadows of the night hid the crafty smile on the face of Jake Arnold. He had been shadowing Bill all evening. But now he crouched against the adobe wall, watching Bill Tillery walk up the dusty road that served as a street. Then he turned his attention to the nun who, in a sort of daze, counted the money in the worn wallet. His green-gray eyes narrowed, glittering. This was a luckier break than he had expected. This nun had the money he wanted. He'd get Bill Tillery later with a heavy bladed knife between his shoulder blades, there in the dark somewhere. Then he'd head for South America—and the back trail of Jake Arnold would be blotted out forever.

He grinned to himself, watching the nun through the window. He saw her put the wallet in a pocket of her black robe. She was dismissing her flock of pupils now. Distributing small bundles of food and clothing and sweets. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. Her face was radiant—for the saintly woman with the silvery voice had beheld a miracle. The *Señor Dios* had wrought that miracle, sending as a messenger a cowboy with a scarred face.

There in the old adobe house the black clad nun and her little flock knelt on the dirt floor and prayed to the madonna in its niche in the thick adobe wall. And when the children had gone, the nun examined against the contents of the wallet.

She saw the frayed letters from Doris Palmer to her brother—letters aged by years—and a newspaper clipping that told of a train wreck. Bill Tillery, in his embarrassment, had forgotten to take the clipping from the wallet, even as he had neglected to take from it a letter he had, under the name of Bill Jones, received from the St. Paul's Mission in Montana stating that the boy left there by the Sarcee squaw had died of smallpox the winter before. The boy had been christened John Arnold.

And Jake Arnold, out there in the dark shadows of the Mexican night, was not even thinking of the Sarcee squaw he had killed in Montana because she knew too much about his past. He had killed her with the knife he now held in his hand. His green-gray eyes watched the nun, there in the lamplight—watched her as she blew out the light and left the building.

Then he slid the heavy knife back in its sheath. There was no need for murder. This was Mexico and the woman was a nun. Murder might lead to trouble. A swift, sure blow with his fist would suit his purpose just as well.

The nun had just left the building when Jake Arnold struck her, there in the darkness. Then as she fell he kicked her in the head. He dragged her back into the dark building, bound and gagged her, then with the wallet in his pocket, slipped away into the shadows of the night.

He had one more job to do before he could go on his way. Bill Tillery would have to be wiped out. Some Mexican would be blamed for the knifing of the gringo cowboy. And Jake Arnold would be in South America soon, living the life of a king there around the saloons and gambling joints of Buenos Aires. Jake Arnold grinned to himself as he pocketed the wallet and then entered the first cantina he came to.

BILL TILLERY watched the clock, there in the saloon. His better judgment told him to quit town and risk a getaway. But he dared not leave Jake Arnold behind to tell what he knew of that train wreck. There were no two ways about it, he'd have to square his account with Arnold, then head for another country, change his name, make a new start. In his pocket was the picture of the youngster Doris who was now grown to womanhood. He'd taken care of that obligation, anyhow, squared a debt of honor. Then he remembered the newspaper clipping and the letter from the Jesuit priest at St. Paul's Mission in Montana. It was too late now to reclaim them. He watched the hands of the clock as they approached midnight.

There were five minutes to go when he decided to step outside for a breath of air. The saloon was crowded, heavy with smoke and the odor of stale liquor. But he thought he might miss Jake Arnold. So he stuck around and waited.

But at midnight—at twelve thirty—there was still no sign of Jake Arnold. Bill Tillery was a little dizzy from the thick, foul air in the saloon. Drunken Mexicans and white men crowded the bar and the gambling tables. Bill Tillery wanted a breath or two of clean, fresh air, so he stepped out onto the street finally filling his lungs with fresh air. The street was deserted save for horses tied to the hitchracks and a few drunken stragglers.

Then a stab of pain in his shoulder sent him reeling backwards, off balance. That heavy blade was buried deep. It had come with such terrific force that it cut through his collarbone. Bill Tillery, thrown to his knees by the impact of the blade, jerked his gun. He took a snapshot at a moving shadow. Then bullets snarled like hornets around his head as he staggered to his feet, shooting at Jake Arnold who was cursing him thickly and firing back.

Arnold, un-nerved by his failure to kill Bill Tillery, ran to the hitchrack and mounted a horse. Bill Tillery, dizzy from pain, his gun now empty, vaulted into the saddle of his waiting horse to race after the killer. He could hardly stay in the saddle. With all his strength he flung his gun at Jake Arnold. He saw it strike the knife-slinger's head. . . .

Then the deserted street was choked with men and horses, with Mexican vaqueros, cowboys, soldiers, policemen, all milling around in confusion. Bill Tillery spurred hi shorse into the horse Arnold was riding. They piled up, men and horses. Bill Tillery clubbed at Arnold's face with his fist. Then something struck him between the eyes and everything went black.

BILL TILLERY had never been in a hospital. There was the faint odor of ether in his nostrils when he awoke. And there beside the hospital bed stood Sister Cecelia and a nurse. There was no mistaking the face of that white clad nurse. The dark brown hair, her brown eyes, her smile, all belonged to Doris Palmer. Bill Tillery blinked his eyes and managed a grin—not much of a grin, but it sufficed. The nun and Doris Palmer smiled. There was an ugly bruise on the white skin of the nun's cheek.

"Don't try to talk," said Doris Palmer. She was holding his hand in hers. "You've had a hard time of it. Sister Cecelia had you brought here."

"Where is. . . ?"

"That man Arnold? He's dead!" Doris said. "An Indian killed him with a knife. But before he died he confessed to killing two trappers in Canada and his Indian wife. The Indian who killed him got

away. Nobody tried very hard to catch him. He said something about a man named Bill Tillery who was a murderer. But a Montana sheriff who was here told Sister Cecelia that Bill Tillery was an innocent man. The man who killed this cattle foreman in Montana confessed, clearing the name of Bill Tillery. Now don't you think you'd better close your eyes?"

"No ma'am." Bill Tillery gripped Doris Palmer's hand tightly. "Not yet. You say an Injun killed Jake Arnold?"

"Yes. A Canadian Indian. A Sarcee, Arnold said. The Yaquis are hiding him. And the Mexican officers don't want him anyhow."

"And the sheriff said that Bill Tillery. . . ."

"Is dead," said Doris Palmer. "He went back to Montana. Bill Tillery, he says, was killed in the train wreck that killed my brother Oren."

So died Bill Tillery on the law records. And a cowboy with a scarred face one day in June married a nurse named Doris Palmer. And he gave his name as Bill Jones. Which, after all, is as good a name as the next—especially down in Mexico where names don't count for much. . . .

THE END

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Coward's Crucible

By Miles Overholt

(Author of "Looted Legacy," etc.)

Sheriff Pete Dorr would never have scrawled that last blood-stained message had he known that his own words would pin onto the most arrant coward in Arapaho County the cherished law-badge for which old Pete had given his life!

TWO cowpunchers from the D-Bar-D outfit brought Sheriff Pete Dorr's body into San Remo from where they had found the dead peace officer at the head of Hanging Rock Gulch.

The lawman had been shot four times, but before passing out he had scratched in the sand the words: "Zanger shot me. Keep Tommy—"

The sentence was unfinished. Pete Dorr had died before he had been able to complete the message. But the citizens of San Remo guessed at the intended request—it was that Tommy Dorr, the sheriff's twenty-two-year-old son be given his star.

So without a dissenting voice, Tommy Dorr was forthwith made the new sheriff. This was done without the boy's knowledge and immediately after the funeral.

The sheriff's son would, the county com-

missioners said, want to take up where his father had left off and either capture or kill Zip Zanger and his crew of renegade gunmen who infested the county.

But when Tommy Dorr was told that he had been selected as the new sheriff, he swallowed painfully and could not say a word. The commissioners believed the boy was too overcome with gratitude to speak. Really the knowledge had frightened him so that his tongue was paralyzed.

Tommy Dorr had been a sore trial to Pete Dorr. In vain had the old lawman instilled into his son the gun-fighting knowledge he had learned from many years of experience. He had taught the boy his wizard-draw, his twisting, weaving, dodging style of evading bullets, his expert marksmanship and dozens of other tactics. All of which the youngster easily absorbed. But Tommy just couldn't fight. He didn't want to kill anybody, or any living thing. He couldn't.

Once, when Tommy was twelve, Pete had compelled him to shoot a deer, and Tommy, after the buck had toppled over the side of a gorge, threw himself on his face and sobbed for an hour. For six or seven years, Pete had endeavored to make of his son a real he-man, and finally gave up in despair. Tommy had no use for a gun. He hated it, although he was even faster than his dad on the draw, and as accurate in marksmanship.

Tommy Dorr knew that his father had not meant, as the townspeople had surmised, that they were to "Keep Tommy on the trail of Zip Zanger." The boy knew that his dad had meant: "Keep Tommy out of the office of sheriff," or some similar request. For Pete Dorr gave up trying to make a gun-fighter of his son a year or so before he had died.

"Yellow! That's what yuh are!" old Pete had told the kid. "Yuh ain't got any guts! Soft, I reckon, like a girl. God! If yuh was a girl I wouldn't mind, but being a man, purty near, an' still havin' a yellow streak . . . !"

But now the boy had to carry on. Had to, because he was too scared not to! He dared not face his fellow citizens and say he was afraid to take the job offered him.

Besides, there was Virginia Fair, daughter of W. H. Fair, wealthy citizen and breeder of fine horses. Virginia and Tommy had been pals since their school days, and they still were, in a way. Only the girl had heard Tommy's dad berating him once for his lack of courage, and that sort of bothered her. But she said nothing to Tommy about it.

So Tommy Dorr, in fear and trembling, became sheriff of Arapahoe County. Congratulations left him inarticulate; words of condolence caused him to turn away. And from a happy-go-lucky, loquacious youngster, he turned to a silent, brooding, serious-minded young man.

He was informed that he could choose a deputy, but he declined with a shake of his head. He was afraid to appoint a deputy—afraid lest the deputy learn he was yellow. And he had to carry on—carry a double burden—because of the fear that the townspeople would learn that which his father had known all the time.

The new sheriff was expected, he had been told, to end the blazing career of Zip Zanger and his band of robbers and rustlers. Then there was Poge Willoughby, who operated at the extreme northern end of the big county. This outlaw was fully as dangerous and as active as Zanger.

TOMMY DORR wanted to saddle up his Red horse and flee—ride into another state, into some peaceful community where no one would know he was a coward, but he was afraid to do that. Besides, there was the Three 6 Ranch which he now owned. It would take time to sell it, and he didn't want to sell anyway. The Three 6 was a monument to his fighting

father; it must remain so. And he couldn't leave Virginia Fair.

On the third or fourth day of his tenure in office, a gunman named Chick Dunbar shot and killed Koke Tyler in the Eagle Saloon. The badman never had given the old prospector a chance. It had been a cowardly murder, as everybody knew.

Dunbar swaggered out of the saloon, after holding the loafers in check with his gun.

"I'm ridin'," he grated as he paused at the doorway. "Tell that two-bit sheriff to keep off my trail or I'll beat him to death with his own gun an' wear his star outa the country."

Then he ran to his horse and fled.

Dunbar rode out of town at dusk, and fifteen minutes later the new sheriff had been told the gruesome details—and the gunman's warning. Tommy's face paled, and he bit his lips to keep them from trembling. His informant thought his strange expression was that of hate for the slayer who had issued the defiance.

Without a word, the new sheriff went out and mounted his Red horse and took the trail. In all the country, there was no better trailer than Tommy Dorr. His dad had taught him that, too.

The young officer's brain was whirling. He knew he was not going to tackle that badman. He had no intention of approaching him within shooting distance. But he had to make some sort of a bluff. Then, as he rode, a plan came to Tommy. He knew that in the Round Head Hills, up on Whispering Creek, Koke Tyler had a partner waiting for his return. And old Pete Raymaker would do his best to avenge the killing of his life-long partner.

Two hours later Tommy discovered that Dunbar was heading up Whispering Creek. He wondered why, for there were better trails out of the country. Then it occurred to the sheriff that perhaps there had been a reason for Tyler's killing. Maybe Dunbar had made plans to kill the old prospector, then ride to the old man's placer camp and rob Pete Raymaker.

That theory gave him another fright. It had been Tommy's plan to cut in around Dunbar and ride to Raymaker's camp and inform him of Tyler's death—incite the old gun-slinger to take the badman's trail. Now it looked as though the badman might steal up on Raymaker and kill him, too. So the sheriff spurred up his mount in a mad endeavor to beat Dunbar to the placer camp.

Dunbar's trail disappeared a mile or so below the placer mine, but Tommy spent no time hunting for it. He had to beat him to Pete Raymaker. But he failed. His theory had been correct—Dunbar had ridden up there for the purpose of robbing Pete. It had all been planned days before, when the badman had ridden down that way and had observed that the two old miners had a cache of dust. He had staged a quarrel with Tyler so that he could kill him, leaving only one man with which to deal at the camp.

Tommy rode boldly into Raymaker's camp, and halted at the doorway of the cabin, eyes wide and frightened, breath coming in gasps.

For lying on the floor of the little shack was the body of Click Dunbar. He had been shot in the head. Then, at the sound of a voice, Tommy turned his head, startled.

"Yuh after that feller, Tommy?"

The sheriff choked, swallowed, and stared at Pete Raymaker. The old miner came closer, rifle in hand.

"He was figgerin' on robbin' me an' Koke," he went on, pointing a bony finger at the dead man. "He was a mite slow, because I saw him sneaking up on me on foot. Goin' to take me in?"

Tommy shook his hand, the blood rushing back to his face.

He managed to get his tongue to work-

ing then, and said: "He killed Koke."

Pete nodded.

"Yeh. So he told me afore he kicked off," said Pete. "I kinda paid him off for that, I reckon." Then he straightened up. "Look, Tommy," he said, "I wonder would yuh do me a favor—jus' don't let on I killed this feller. I'm kinda skeered his pals might hear about it an' worry me some. But if they think the sheriff shot him, why, they won't bother. You see, I got me quite a lot of gold to wash out yet, an' I don't want to have to stop an' shoot somebody every day or two."

"Why, I—I—Why, yes, I reckon I can do that," Tommy gulped.

It would shore be a favor," said old Pete Raymaker.

So when Tommy Dorr brought the body of Click Dunbar into town and offered no explanations whatever, the citizens said one to the other that Tommy Dorr was certainly the son of his father—he got whomever he went after.

Tommy Dorr hated himself for his cowardice and because he had taken credit for killing Click Dunbar, but he knew he dare not confess to anyone that he had only brought in the body of the badman after someone else had killed him. His mind was cluttered up with a strange mixture of fear, loyalty to his father's memory, and duty. But he never stopped to analyze it. He didn't dare think.

Then another calamity struck him.

W. H. Fair, father of the girl he loved, but whom he had been too ashamed to see of late, stalked into his office and announced that two prize stallions, for which he had paid $5,000 apiece, had been stolen during the night from his horse ranch at the edge of town.

Again that agonizing spasm of fear swept over the young man; again he was unable to answer. He swallowed hard, paled and, in order to hide his trembling, began pawing through the drawers of his desk.

Finally, though, he managed to blurt: "I'll go after 'em."

Then he stalked out without further words, which he could not utter, anyway, and got aboard his horse.

He picked up the trail with little difficulty and followed it down toward the Animas County line, which passed near his own ranch, the Three G.

He had not the slightest idea about what he would do when he came within sight of the thieves. There were two of them, he discovered. But again he had to make a showing.

When Fair had urged him to take a posse, the young sheriff had merely shaken his head. He didn't want a posse to learn of his yellow streak, which he was certain would show once it came time for action.

The thieves had considerable start and it was nearly nightfall before Tommy observed that he must be within a few miles of them. He halted in some shrubbery at the top of a hill and gazed down into a little valley when he scented fresh smoke. Soon a flicker told him that the rustlers were making camp. Shortly now he could steal up on them and possibly get the drop on them.

But at the thought his limbs trembled; he knew now that he could not do it. Why, he could not even hold a gun steadily! Yet he must do something. So he pondered the matter for ten minutes. Then an idea struck him.

Back in the Three G lower pasture there was a herd of mares and Nemo, a fighting stallion. The Three G was less than an hour's ride to the north. If he could free the herd and stampede the leader. . . .

He turned his horse and clattered down the hill. The moon was up by the time he had reached the pasture. Quickly he threw open the gate and got the herd in motion.

An old bell mare took the lead and

struck out across the hills at Tommy's urging. The mare could be depended upon to lead wherever the rider pointed her. Now she headed straight for the little valley in which the rustlers held the prize stallions.

Within three or four miles of the valley, Tommy caught the lead mare and removed the bell, cached it, and then started the band over a trail that would lead into the valley from above.

At the top of the hill, overlooking the rustler's camp, Nemo scented the prize stallions, snorted, and took the lead, tearing down the hill at breakneck speed and straight toward the spot where the stolen horses were tethered.

The rustlers heard the band thundering down the valley and leaped to their feet, not expecting, however, that it was anything but a herd of wild horses coming down to water.

But Nemo was not thinking of water. Straight for the camp he tore, heading for the stallions below. Squealing his rage, the leader, seeing only those two stallions, led the band straight into the camp. Too late, the rustlers tried to flee. One was knocked down and trampled by Nemo, struggled there in the moonlight for a few moments, then straightened out.

The second, turning to run, was struck by the wide-spreading band of mares and knocked into the campfire where he was again struck by a sharp hoof as he started to rise. He fell back without a groan, kicked spasmodically until he was out of the ashes, rolled over and lay still.

Tommy Dorr did not see this, for he suddenly realized that he must do something about Nemo, or at least one of those prize stallions, tethered as they were, would be killed.

So, forgetting all about the thieves, he dashed into the herd, his rope swinging. He whirled it and, luckily, or because of his desperation, dropped the loop over Nemo's head just as the stallion was leaping for the nearest prize horse.

Tommy's Red horse braced his feet and Nemo, feeling the rope was tightening, promptly whirled, facing the rider. The stallion was in deadly fear of a lariat.

It was not until Tommy had tied the stallion firmly to a tree that he bethought himself of the rustlers. Then a great fear began to assail him, but when he took a long look at the devastating scene there where the campfire had been, he felt reassured. Both men were dead, and not greatly disfigured by the flailing hoofs.

One of the men's heads was crushed, but the first one had only a deep bruise back of the ear. It had been severe enough, that blow, to kill him almost instantly, however.

Tommy led Nemo back to the Three G, the mares following docilely behind, and turned the herd back into the pasture. Then he rode his tired Red horse back to the valley, saddled the rustler's mounts and tied the bodies into the saddles. He tailed the horses and headed back to town.

THE young sheriff's latest exploit was the talk of the county. The undertaker, never a reticent man, told a few friends that neither of the rustlers had been shot, but each had been beaten to death, probably with the muzzle of a gun.

"Gawd! What a fight it musta been!" said Abe Teneycke, saloon-man. "That young hellion is just a natural-born killer. He ketches up with two bad eggs an' then, instead of shootin' 'em, beats hell out of 'em. Just for th' fun of it, I reckon."

Tommy, of course, explained nothing. He didn't dare.

So the saloon-man's story was accepted as the correct one, and W. H. Fair came into the sheriff's office and tried to congratulate and thank Tommy for his prompt action in recovering the stolen stallions and killing the rustlers, but the

young man would have none of it. He fretfully turned away and left the father of the girl he loved to wonder at the change in the heretofore happy-go-lucky youth.

Virginia Fair heard, of course, about Tommy's sudden disposition to kill a wrong-doer first and arrest him afterward, and now she was torn between emotions. She didn't know whether she would rather have Tommy a coward or a killer. One seemed to be as repugnant to her as the other.

But she had no opportunity to express her views either way to the young sheriff. He was growing more and more ashamed to meet her. He felt that he could not look into her own honest brown eyes and not confess his shortcomings, and he couldn't bring himself to do that. So he remained away from the Fair home.

Now began a clamoring for this hell-roaring young sheriff to do what his dad had failed to accomplish—get Zip Zanger and then Poge Willoughby, the two outlaw leaders. And Tommy knew he would have to do something about it. But what?

One day he saw one of Zanger's men ride into town—Ax Mills. Tommy had known Mills before he joined Zip's band, and he also recognized the ZZ horse.

After dusk, before lights were turned on in the stores and no one on the street was recognizable, Tommy stole out and fastened a note in disguised handwriting to the saddle on Mill's horse. The note read:

Zanger:

There ain't room enough in Arapahoe county for me an' you. One of us is moving pronto—out or straight down. I kinda think it'll be you. Or mebbe we kin git together. If you ain't afeard, meet me with two men, an' I'll bring two of mine, at the mouth of Hideout Canyon Tuesday about 3 o'clock. That's half way between our headquarters. Unless you are a damn coward, you and your men will be there an' we can talk it over. We may git together at that. No shootin', you understand. Just a kinda git-together meetin'.

POGE WILLOUGHBY.

The note had been placed in a plain envelope, and Tommy felt certain it would arrive at its destination.

The young sheriff did not know just why he had sent the note, but he had a vague hope that perhaps the two outlaws would start a quarrel and maybe they would kill each other.

He saddled up then and rode out of town, carrying another note. This one, addressed to Willoughby, was practically a repetition of the other.

He rode nearly all night and at daylight, having hidden his badge, halted at the entrance to the Hell Hole, which was the rendezvous of Poge Willoughby. He knew he would be hailed shortly, so he waited until a gun was poked up over a huge boulder at the entrance and he heard a harsh voice.

"Well, what yuh want, hombre?" asked the guard.

"Not a thing," answered Tommy pleasantly. "Feller give me ten dollars to bring this letter out here. That's all I know—an' all I want to know. Yuh want to take it, or what do I do now?"

"Who's it for?" the guard wanted to know.

"How do I know?" answered Tommy. Then he looked at the envelope. "It says Williams, or Willoughby, or something."

"Yuh better ride in an' talk to th' boss," the guard said then, stepping into plain view. But Tommy shook his head.

"Not me," he said. "I snuck away from th' round-up to make ten bucks, an' I got to get back pronto. Here; take it."

He tossed the envelope toward the guard, turned his horse and cantered away and around the outpost and into a big field of boulders. He was pretty

certain the guard would not try to follow him. And he was right.

HE reached town at nightfall, stabled his horse and ate supper and went to bed. This was Saturday night. He had two days in which to plan a scheme to get those two outlaws to leap at the throats of each other, but it seemed that he had done all he could to stimulate such an endeavor. And maybe nothing would come of it.

There were, he had learned, about a dozen men in Zanger's band of salty bandits; Poge Willoughby had ten in his murder-crew. To dispose of them was certainly more than a one-man job.

It occurred to Tommy to take a big posse out to the mouth of Hide-out Canyon and lie in wait for the outlaws and take them in by superior force, but there were too many chances in that. First, he was sure he would disgrace himself in front of the men he was supposed to lead into battle. He'd probably turn tail and flee. Then there was the fifty-fifty chance that neither of the outlaw leaders would appear at the appointed place, fearing a lure by peace officers.

He decided, finally, that all he could do would be to go out there and find a safe hiding place and watch through his field glasses whatever took place.

And that is what he did. He was in the saddle long before daylight on Tuesday morning, for he wanted to steal away without being seen. Besides, he felt certain that each outlaw leader would send scouts out ahead to spy the terrain, fearing a trap. He must be well hidden before those scouts showed up.

He located an ideal hiding place only a few hundred yards from the mouth of the canyon. It was safe and secret; just made for spying. It was a pocket of huge granite boulders which towered above the canyon, but which did not appear from any angle to have an opening. Tommy had known about this hiding place from his range riding. That is why he selected the canyon's mouth as a meeting place.

Long before the noon hour, Tommy's vigilant eyes caught the movement of a rider across the valley. He circled the canyon's mouth, crossed back and climbed a ridge, where he stopped and gazed all about him. Then he rode along the top of the ridge for a mile or so, down it and across the gulch to the opposite ridge where he halted to peer into the canyon and across the flats.

Apparently satisfied for the time being, the strange rider then rode down into the adjoining canyon and disappeared.

"Hiding out," said Tommy to himself.

Shortly after noon, another rider appeared across the valley and went through practically the same maneuvers as the first one, and then he, too, went into hiding in the canyon to the south. Both scouts were now one canyon away from Hideout, but on opposite sides.

Tommy ate his lunch, smoked awhile, and waited for the approach of three o'clock. At about two-thirty, he swung his glasses to the south where he glimpsed a cloud of dust. Then to the north where a second spiral had appeared. He began to tremble. Now that the thing was coming to a head, he wished he knew what to do about it. And again that nauseating fear assailed him.

He cursed himself for a coward, scourged himself for being yellow, but it was of no avail. He still trembled as if he had buck fever and a feeling of dread came over him so that he could hardly hold the field glasses steady.

Horsemen could now be seen—three of them coming from the north, three from the south. They came on steadily, both groups, and shortly out from the canyons rode the scouts to meet the approaching horsemen. They stopped and con-

versed for a few moments, then each scout turned and rode back into the canyon from which he had emerged.

But neither group could see each other because of the bend in the hills, although both were in plain view to the sheriff, whose glasses now disclosed that the two outlaw chieftains were nearing each other.

Soon they rounded the two bends which hid them from each other, and then the groups rode slowly, warily; each suspicious of the other.

Tommy, leaving his horse, now stole down the hill through the shrubbery and boulder nests. He could not be seen, anyway, from the canyon's mouth but it was possible, he feared, that one of the scouts might see him.

He reached a point within a hundred yards or so of the two groups of outlaws which had approached within talking distance.

"All right, Zanger," called Willoughby. "Yuh come far enough. Spill it."

"Hell! Yuh're the one started th' argyment. Spill yore own talk!" snarled Zanger.

"Started nothin'!" barked Willoughby. "Yuh sent me a note. What the hell is it all about?"

"I sent yuh a note! Yuh're crazy! Yuh sent me a note, yuh mean."

"I mean what I say now, an' always. What yuh got on yore mind, feller? I don't care a hell of a lot for yore company, I'm tellin' yuh that right now."

"Yuh mean to say yuh didn't send me a note?" demanded Zanger.

"Aw, say yore piece," snarled Willoughby. "Yuh sent for me; now do yore talkin' or vamoose."

Zanger eyed his rival for a moment, then said: "Yuh got any more men hid out somewheres around hyar?"

"One of the boys is waitin' down yon a ways to see yuh don't play no tricks," answered Willoughby.

"Yuh don't trust me none, hey?"

"Not for a minit!"

"Say, Poge, yuh s'pose we was made suckers of?" said Zanger then, in a more friendly tone. "Yuh say yuh didn't write me no note. I say I didn't write yuh none. But hyar's yore message."

He took Tommy's note from his pocket as Willoughby drew out the letter he had received.

THEY were about to get together, Tommy knew. They would probably figure everything out now and place the blame where it belonged. Then they would seek him out and kill him!

The young sheriff was now more frightened than ever. He wanted to turn and flee wildly into the hills—to get away from that nerve-wracking scene. But even as he thought of it, he knew he could not get away now. They were already suspicious. Within a few minutes they would be hunting for him.

But what could he do? Death, perhaps torture, stared him in the face. Cold sweat broke out all over him; he breathed chokingly and his heart thumped so loudly that he was afraid the tense outlaws would hear it.

Then instinct went to work for him. Slowly he lifted his rifle, aimed it and firmly pulled the trigger. One of the outlaw's horses squealed, whirled around dizzily and sank to the ground.

Then there came a vicious curse, a snarl and six guns began spouting lead.

"I figgered yuh had yore men layin' back there to shoot us down, yuh dirty skunk!" Zip Zanger roared, thumbing his gun.

Willoughby and his men said nothing, but sent shot after shot into the three outlaws facing them. Tommy, fascinated, forgot to be frightened. He saw Zanger slide off his horse, then Willoughby. He watched as a Zanger man took four bul-

lets in the chest and still cling to the saddle horn. He saw a Willoughby man throw both arms upward and pitch out of the saddle.

Then he saw the two scouts dashing toward each other, shooting as they rode and cursed.

And in less than ten minutes the echoes no longer resounded in the hills. The battle was over—and eight men lay dead. Eight men and three horses.

And now Tommy Dorr stood up, a twisted grin on his face, and he no longer trembled. Indeed, he had stopped trembling the moment he raised his rifle. Somehow he seemed to sense that that would end his fears.

He strode out from his hiding place and went down to the shambles. Every man was dead, for each had been shot at least three times, some five and six.

Tommy caught the outlaws' horses and spent the afternoon tying the bodies into the saddles. It was nearly dusk by the time he was heading back to San Remo.

He stopped in front of the undertaker's office and helped carry the bodies inside.

"Who yuh got there this time?" the undertaker wondered.

"Zip Zanger and Poge Willoughby and his segundos and such," answered Tommy, none too jubiliantly. He was not proud of what he had done. He had had no part in it, except to bring the two groups together, and he regarded that only as a coward's trick.

So from that day onward, Sheriff Tommy Dorr had a reputation that would not be denied. He had not, of course, given out any information. There were the two bandit leaders and their right and left bowers. What more did the public want?

Nothing more, apparently. The young sheriff was idolized and toasted and looked upon with awe and admiration wherever he went. But he was made no happier. In fact he grew more and more morose and taciturn. His friends and fellow citizens regarded his demeanor as correct and proper. He was a brave, fearless gunfighter, an upholder of the peace and dignity of Arapahoe. He had a right to be serious.

And then one day there rode into San Remo a two-gun man who appeared to have something on his mind—a deadly determination. He tied his horse to the rail in front of the Trail Herd saloon and went inside and bought a drink.

"I'm lookin' for the sheriff who killed my pal, Click Dunbar," he said to the bartender. "I aim to send him after Click. Where is he?"

"He's around, I reckon," said the bartender. "Only I'm tellin' yuh for yore own good yuh better leave him alone. That youngster is hell an' repeat, mister. He killed eight salty outlaws all by hisself a week ago an' didn't git a scratch—eight of th' toughest hombres in the whole damn state. Yuh better kinda think ag'in, seems like."

"I'm doin' this, feller," snarled the gunman. "I'm Gunner Anderson. Nobuddy ever made me quit yet, an' I been around some. Send somebuddy to tell that fighter of yores I'm here an' will be waitin' outside for him."

"I'll go tell him myownse'f," said Tobe Fanchett, removing his white coat. "I'm off now, anyways."

When Tobe told Tommy about the badman, the young sheriff surprised himself by grinning. A sudden feeling of elation swept over him, then a coldness which he could not explain. There was no trembling now, no fear whatever. Just a deadly calm and a desire to match guns.

"Tell him to step out into the middle of the street so nobody else will get hurt," said Tommy. "I'm starting down that way pronto."

The bartender hurried back to the saloon. Tommy looked to his gun, slipped

it forward an inch, grinned at himself in the mirror there by his desk, and went out onto the street.

ACTUALLY now he welcomed this encounter. Yet, in a way, he was numb.

Vaguely, disconnectedly, he felt himself propelled along toward his goal. It was, it came to him then, as though he was a bystander watching himself walk down to match guns with the badman, his challenger. Then he thrilled. It had come to him, suddenly, that he was not himself at all, but his father, walking deliberately and calmly out to face the deadly gun of an unknown fighter. It seemed to him now that the spirit of Pete Dorr had entered him and was driving him on to courageously meet his killer.

He saw the man step out into the street then and advance toward him, hands swinging at his sides, hate twisting his face. Exultingly, Tommy strode forward, calmly, unafraid and confident.

Thirty feet away, the gunman stopped, slapped his holster at the right, then swiftly drew his left-hand gun.

But Tommy was unmoved. The trick was entirely lost on the young sheriff who, as his father had taught him, was watching the killer's eyes. Tommy had, without knowing it, gone for his gun. Both shots seemed to sound simultaneously, but such was not the case, for the gunman's bullet went into the ground directly in front of him. Tommy Dorr's bullet had pierced his heart.

The badman crumpled and fell like a heap of old clothes, face-down in the dust. Tommy holstered his gun and went forward.

"Gawd!" someone murmured. "Did you see that kid's draw!"

The young sheriff turned the dead gunman over with a foot, saw that he would draw on nobody else, then he turned and went back to his office. Bystanders carried the body of the dead man into the undertaking parlors.

Tommy brushed his hair, washed his hands, removed his gun and, mounting his horse, rode straight out to the Fair ranch. Virginia, seeing him approaching, ran out to meet him.

"Oh, Tommy," she said, "I'm so glad to see you. I—what's happened to you? Why, you are back to normal! You are once more the Tommy Dorr we used to know. I'm so glad, Tommy—dear."

"Let's go sit down in the shade," he said, clinging to her hand.

And there, still holding his hand, he confessed everything to the girl he loved; told her of his cowardice, how he held his job by trick and device, and that he had been yellow all the way through. Then, suddenly, he had changed. It seemed to have made a new man of him that day he fired at the outlaw's horse at Hide-out canyon. From then on he had grown up, had become a man, like his father.

Virginia Fair laughed. Tommy looked at her, wondering. She explained.

"I laughed, sweet boy, because it just occurred to me that you never were a coward at all. I laughed from sheer joy. You are not a coward—you were just clever. You caught those rustlers by a clever trick and without firing a gun. You let the horses do it.

"You inveigled those bandits into their own trap, and then sprang it when you shot that outlaw's horse. All that required more bravery than you knew. You are not only a very courageous young man, but you are far too clever for these badmen. It was only when you had to that you discovered that your so-called 'yellowness' was only cleverness. I'm proud of you."

Tommy went back to his office an hour or so later, then over to the offices of the county commissioners.

"I'm turning in my star," he said. "I'm

getting married and my girl wants to live on the ranch. And, anyway, most anybody can run the sheriff's office now." This a bit arrogantly, even proudly.

The commissioners tried to prevail upon him to remain in office, but he steadfastly refused, and in the end they accepted his resignation.

"The outlaws left the county, after their leaders were killed," Tommy explained, "and all the rest of the badmen left at about the same time. I've cleaned up the job Dad started and I'd like to get back to normal. Sheriffing is serious. And I don't want to be serious. I want to have some fun."

Then he went back to see Virginia Fair.

Throughout the grapevine telegraph which all owl-hooters know and heed, there traveled a warning, which, had Tommy known it, would have elated him greatly. It was:

"Keep away from Araaphoe County. There's a young sheriff up there that's a gunnin' fool. He shoots first—a long way first—and never quits till everybody but hisself is dead. Arapahoe county is too hot. Lay off!"

And from that time on, that is just what happened.

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ROPE FOR A KILLER

A GUST of laughter came from the saloon at Tiendas. It was derisive, mean laughter, not whole-hearted and jovial, and it grated on the ear. Hamp Falconer, passing by, paused, then jingled his spurs inside, curious. Young Hamp had a wide mouth to which a smile easily fitted, but he didn't laugh as the men in the saloon were laughing.

They were teasing an old drunk who sat on the floor against a whiskey barrel. Like dogs worrying a cat, they shouted at him and poked him with their feet, while their victim, a little man with a dirty white mustache, dressed in ragged range clothes, struck back feebly.

"Who's that?" asked Hamp.

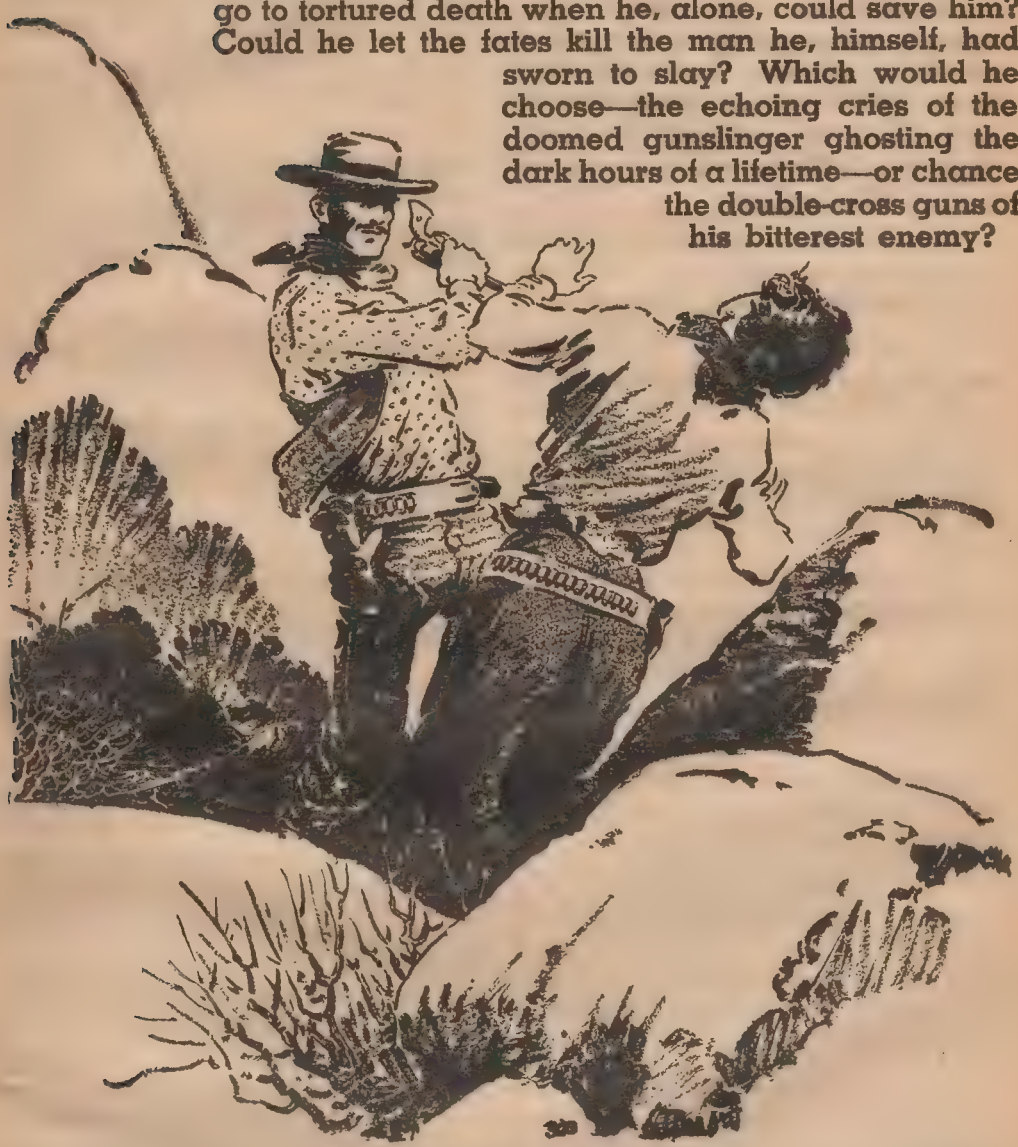
"Sandy Mullens," said the bartender.

Gripping Man-Stuff Novelette

By Ray Nafziger

(Author of "Son of a Fighting Clan," etc.)

Would young Hamp Falconer let the man he hated go to tortured death when he, alone, could save him? Could he let the fates kill the man he, himself, had sworn to slay? Which would he choose—the echoing cries of the doomed gunslinger ghosting the dark hours of a lifetime—or chance the double-cross guns of his bitterest enemy?



"Lower'n a snake's tail hangin' down a well, the drunk old bum. I thought ever'body knowed Sandy Mullens. Got drunk on Mex bugjuice and comes into a white man's saloon to sleep it off," growled the bartender. "Vamos, you!" he ordered Mullens. "Git out'n here!" He raised a heavy-soled shoe and drew it back to plant in the old ribs.

Hamp Falconer stepped in. "I wouldn't do that," he remarked to the bartender who towered above him.

"The hell you wouldn't!" growled the bartender.

"No, I wouldn't," said Hamp quietly, and the bartender suddenly cooled. He knew Hamp Falconer who ranched across the desert over in the Canyon Grande

country. Whoever started anything with Hamp Falconer had better be prepared to finish it.

"I'll look after him," offered Hamp. Falconer picked up the whiskey-soaked old hellion and bore him to the livery stable. Which was like Hamp, a young damn fool living out beyond the desert; probably he never saw enough people to lose his liking for them.

"This is a decent, self-respectin' livery barn, Hamp," complained the stable man. "Or it was, 'fore yuh lugged that in."

Falconer took off his sombrero, letting his curly shock of red hair spring up almost upright, and gravely inspected the bedraggled heap of sodden humanity that was Sandy Mullens. "What's the country got agin this old Sandy Mullens?" he inquired.

"Everything," said the livery man. "He ain't wu'th the rope to hang him. He's a low-down, ornary skunk; a whinin' dead beat. Don't waste no tears on him, nor don't try to help him. He'll turn and do yuh dirt."

Hamp Falconer finished his inspection. "With ever'body bearin' down on a man, he ain't got much chance to be a man," he stated. "Has he ever had a chancet?"

"Plenty. Born of a good family back East. Plenty people give him a chancet here an' he double-crossed 'em. Fergit him, Hamp. Pick out some yeller cur in an alley to be sorry for."

Late that evening, Falconer woke up Sandy Mullens, gave him a drink and boosted him into the saddle of a borrowed horse and they jogged out over the desert toward Falconer's ranch.

That was the beginning of Hamp's guardianship of an old bar-room bum. At his ranch the next day, he stripped the old man, burned his filthy clothes, washed him in a creek and provided a clean outfit from his own warbag. Then Hamp gave him another drink and told Mullens that he was on the water wagon.

Blear-eyed, Sandy Mullens cursed Hamp, and then started walking back toward town. Hamp let him go, and rode after him that evening. Mullen had gone about five miles before giving out in a sand storm that swept the desert. Falconer brought him in, gave him a little more whiskey, and in a day or so got him up on a horse, and they rode line together. After that Sandy sullenly stayed at the ranch.

Hamp, if anyone had asked him why he bothered, couldn't have told. It was his way. A stray dog that everybody was kicking around he'd have taken home in the same manner. There was nothing likable about Sandy Mullens; neither gratitude, nor honor, nor anything good. Hamp had known men of his sort, who would go without a drink for three months or more, and then they'd go wild, drinking for weeks at a time, running into D. T.'s. Hamp didn't expect to reform him. Old hellers like Sandy Mullens didn't reform.

THREE months almost to the day, Sandy got his hands on a gallon of Taos whiskey over at the Mexican settlement. Hamp's nearest neighbor, Dike Sorrell, discovered him and Hamp brought him home.

Dike was homesteading on the other side of Falconer's Circle S Ranch; he had a section of land, a few cows, a tank made by an earth dike that gave Sorrell his nickname. He and Hamp were no special friends. Dike had once suggested to Hamp that they work on the herd of a widow over in the Mexican community. Hamp had taken it as a joke, but he knew Dike had been serious enough. Dike was the sort who would steal from a helpless woman. A lady chaser, Dike, a handsome hulk of a fellow, looking for ways of living without work.

"So yuh took the job of reformin' me?" Sandy sneered after he had been brought back. "Tryin' to pave yore way into heaven with a good deed? You know and I know I'd be better off dead."

"Sure I know it," Hamp agreed cheerfully. "But you ain't got the nerve to end yourself, nor the nerve to be ornary enough for somebody to do it for you. Why do I keep you? Mebbe I like you around as a bad example, Sandy. We got to fence in some quicksand down in the river tomorrow. Better get some sleep."

Sandy Mullens stared owlishly at him, and held out for the rest of the gallon to taper off on. The man was plain ornary mean and weak, but between sprees he spruced up a little, rode and worked a little. On a horse, he looked half a man; he could ride, boasting that he had been raised in the saddle. Not a cowboy saddle, he said, but the English saddles that gentlemen used back East. There were no gentlemen in the West. Only roughnecks.

Hamp listened to Sandy's sneers good-humoredly. He had in a way taken responsibility for Mullens and Hamp wasn't one to back out. There must still be in Sandy Mullens some remnant of the man he might have been before drink got him. Given a chance, a miracle might happen; he might amount to something.

Mullens had been at Hamp's place a year when Dike Sorrell, the homesteading, handsome neighbor, got into trouble, beating up a small man at a dance so brutally that the man might die. Dike dropped in on Hamp that same night, wanting to sell his few cattle and his tank and house to him in a hurry. The land he had not yet proved up on and it was not his to sell. He could only relinquish to someone else, but Hamp was not interested in it. He had his own ranch and needed no more land.

"Buy just my improvements then," urged Dike. "Nobody will likely take up that homestead after I'm gone. I got to pull out on a high lope an' I need money bad."

Hamp, as a neighborly deed, wrote out a check for more than the cattle were worth and added for the improvements more than they likewise were worth.

After Dike had fled, Hamp thought of Sandy Mullens for Dike's place. Sandy had never used his homestead rights; he could take up the land, after Dike had abandoned it a sufficient time. And Sandy queerly fell in with the idea. The sun, maybe, had baked some of the alcohol out of his tissues. His sprees had become less frequent.

"Me take over that place?" he said when Hamp broached the idea. "A ranch o' my own?" he went on wonderingly.

Hamp looked at him. Something had got into Sandy Mullens, a little iron, a little pride, a little determination. You couldn't reform a man, of course—not often anyway—but maybe this was one of the miracles.

"If you stake me to a little chuck, I think I could stay off the booze," said Sandy. And it suddenly seemed as if there was a new dignity to him at the prospect of becoming a property owner.

Hamp's hand came out. "Shake," he said. "You'll fool this country yet!"

Heads wagged when Hamp established Sandy on Dike's deserted property, with a pair of old ponies, a duck that Dike had stolen from some neighbor, and papers to show that Daniel Mullens was homesteading a section of Uncle Sam's land.

HAMP'S old partner, Big Jim Weatherby, now a cattle inspector, was one of the first to warn Hamp. "Oncet," said Big Jim dryly, "a man took a froze rattlesnake into his house and warmed him up by his stove, and then guess what happened?"

"I can't imagine," drawled Hamp. "But

oncet a young cow inspector handed out a lot of advice about everything when all he knowed about was runnin' down rustlers."

"Don't say I didn't tell yuh," said Big Jim Weatherby. "Don't say I didn't put in a warning word. Sandy Mullens is a snake."

"What harm could he do me?" asked Hamp.

"I hadn't gone into that," said Big Jim. "When I see a rattlesnake roostin' on my bed tarp I could lay and figger just where he might bite me, but 'stead o' that I jes' throw him about twenty foot off, and drop a rock on his head. Other people been took in by Sandy Mullens. A lot. I could tell you of a widow woman what he went through her ranch and left her so that she had to take in washin' for a livin'."

Hamp Falconer wasn't convinced, although Sandy Mullens seemed to lack every desirable human quality. Even when he wasn't making a hog of himself with liquor, he was a man that you simply couldn't like. Yet he improved noticeably on his homestead; he kept his house clean, he looked after Hamp's cattle that came to the tank for water, he fed the duck, watered the trees. And when Hamp branded a few dogies to him, registering a mark in Sandy's name, Mullens began to put on airs.

As a cattleman, Sandy regarded himself on a par with such ranchers as General Terrazas, King and Kenedy of Texas, Miller and Lux of California. He became vain and pompous, as do many men who have been kicked around and have built up delusions of self-grandeur as antidote against the jeers of their fellows. To the few neighbors in the country he become insufferable. But for six months he stayed sober, which was a miracle. And then to match that miracle another miracle happened.

THE miracle appeared in Tiendas one day asking for Mullens. Hamp happened to be in town that same day and they referred the miracle to Hamp. The miracle, a girl, was to Hamp highly embarrassing. Looking at her, Hamp thought confusedly of a lot of things—of certain sunsets, of red roses climbing up a wall. Dark-eyed, with a sweet gravity, she was prettier than any girl had a right to be. She had asked about Daniel Mullens, the rancher, and they had referred her to Hamp, she explained.

"You mean Sandy Mullens, I guess," he said. "That's what he's called."

"I can't imagine Father allowing anyone to call him Sandy. He is much too dignified as I remember him. You see, after my mother died he went West to go into mining and ranching and I stayed with my aunt. We haven't heard from him for years. Recently he wrote that he was now ranching and said that I must come out to visit him some time. My aunt died and I was left alone, and I saw no reason for not coming right out. I haven't seen Father since I was a very little girl."

Sandy had no doubt spread it on thick in his letters; the old fool had written probably about his big ranch, a regular millionaire's hacienda.

Sandy's daughter! It made Hamp a little sick. She must have had a good mother, or there had been something to Sandy Mullens before he had started down grade.

"He's got the ranch next to mine," said Hamp. "I'll borrow a rig and drive you out." Sandy, thank the Lord was sober; he had been so ever since he had taken over Dike Sorrell's homestead.

Then Hamp felt a little chill of apprehension. He'd have a long ride with this girl back to old Sandy's place. What would he talk about to her? Queerly that solved itself. Dorothy Mullens asked him questions about the country, the tibosa

grass, the Canyon Grande and its quicksands, drought, range wars. And through his eyes she saw this land as he saw it, a place to be loved in spite of its hardships and its bleakness. And she saw, too, the genuineness of Hamp Falconer, the honesty and kindliness of the young rancher.

Sandy Mullens did not recognize his daughter. He trembled visibly when she put her arms around him and called him "Father." Then suddenly he murmured huskily, "Little Dot!"

There was a look in the old man's eyes that Hamp hoped never to see again. It was a look of utter misery, as if all his wasted past had come to strike the old fellow a bitter, unexpected blow.

For only a few minutes that mood continued and then Sandy was his old boastful self that he had become since moving into Dike's house. The girl was exclaiming delightedly over the little adobe house, the duck, the sweep of blue mountains rising to the east, but Sandy waved these contemptuously aside.

"A little shack, my dear," he said. "Sufficient for my needs until I can have plans drawn for a mansion. I am living here alone now. This is the season when I can dispense with hands; later I will have my roundup wagons out on the range branding my calves."

As he stood talking, he looked like some old Southern colonel receiving a guest under the pillars of the Colonial mansion on his vast plantation.

Hamp had glimpsed Sandy Mullen's soul for a brief moment. People said he could never have been any good, but Hamp guessed that this man, when he had lost Dot's mother, had come West to forget, had taken to drink, and sunk lower and lower.

Hamp provided a horse and fancy saddle for Dot, pretending that they came from her father. He added a room to the house and bought furniture and the girl made a real home of it. She set out bushes and cactus, made vegetable and flower gardens. She liked riding, she liked the country whole-heartedly, and she was satisfied with little in the way of comforts. Sandy still patronized Hamp, letting it be understood that Hamp was under his wing, that he had even given Hamp his start. The three rode out on range work together, although the old man and the girl were not much help. She, at least, had sense enough to keep out of trouble, but one day, on a steep hill, Sandy tied his rope to a bull that he had no business tying to, on a steep hillside.

Hamp came in, dropped a loop to save him, and his own horse stumbled. In the mix-up Hamp broke his ankle, a bad fracture. The bull had dragged down both horses, and Dot Mullens fearlessly spurred her mount into the melée, giving time for Hamp, despite his ankle, to get the bull roped down. Dot then took charge of Hamp, getting him to Tiendas, and fussing over him as if he lay at the point of death.

It was worth getting a broken leg to know that Dot Mullens cared that much for him. He cared a lot for her, as did the whole country, for that matter. Everyone tried to make it easy for the girl, carefully keeping hidden the fact that her father was the lowest kind of a low skunk.

THE doctor at Tiendas sent Hamp to a bone specialist in El Paso, and old Sandy volunteered patronizingly to look after his young neighbor's cattle while Hamp was away.

It took Hamp longer in El Paso than he had figured. Dot wrote him often telling him about ranch affairs. She told him also that Dike Sorrell had returned and dropped over often to visit them. There was altogether too much in the letters about Dike, Hamp thought worriedly.

Then just before Hamp was allowed to return, the wife of the owner of the big general store in Tiendas asked Dot to go along on a hasty trip to the Grand Canyon. So when Hamp returned he found Dot gone, and Dike Sorrell back. Dike had settled the trouble over the near-killing, and was staying with a Mexican rancher at Ojos. When Dike met Hamp out on the range he greeted Hamp cordially and almost immediately brought up the subject of Dot Mullens.

"Heard you was buzzin' around her strong," said Dike. "I figure to give you a race, Hamp. That girl is one in a thousand."

Dike once had a Mexican wife who had died. He had been mean to her, as he would be mean to any woman.

"I figure this ranch where the Mullens live is really mine," he declared. "I put in the work of buildin' the dike and house and I homesteaded there first."

"You know I paid you for your improvements," Hamp reminded him. "The land is worthless."

Dike laughed. "Yes, but there wasn't nothin' like that on the check. You took advantage of me when I had to skip out."

"Which is a lie," said Hamp. "I paid you more'n it was all worth."

"Mebbe so," admitted Dike. "Here's my proposition. Give me two thousand dollars, and I leave the country."

"Or else?" asked Hamp.

"I tell Dot Mullens about her father and the scrapes he's been in. You know she thinks the old skunk is the salt of the earth. And there's something else, Hamp, that I got on you. You grubstaked Sandy to homestead my section for you, Hamp, and the law calls that 'collusion.' The government is hard on cowmen that get old drunks to homestead land for 'em. It goes as stealing from Uncle Sam and it'll be the pen for both of you."

For a half minute Hamp stared at Dike Sorrell, and then his grey eyes began to smolder. Much the same size, the same build, the men were well matched, but Dike wore—as he had always worn—a .45 at his hip. Hamp sometimes carried a carbine in a saddle boot for coyotes; never a six-shooter.

Yet it was Dike who stepped back now as Hamp came toward him, even though Dike's hand fell to the butt of his gun.

"Damn you, Dike!" burst out Hamp. "I ought to take you apart. I had no intention of buying Sandy out after he proved up on that section. And you talk about that girl again, Dike, and I'll run you out of the country, with me layin' my rope end on your back."

"Yeah?" snarled Dike. "I got a gun, cowboy. I could kill you here, but I might have to stay away permanent next time. Two thousand, Hamp, and I leave the country an' keep my mouth shut."

"Not a damn cent," said Hamp bitterly. "Keep off my range and away from the people on it. I'm warning you only once."

"And I made you an offer," said Dike. "Come around and take it inside o' three days. Or else—"

CHAPTER TWO

Froze Snake

BACK on his ranch, Hamp Falconer was busy for three days, riding range. In those three days he could find not more than about half the yearlings he ought to have. He had owned three hundred at spring round-up, and now he doubted if they would tally out more than a hundred and sixty. Some cows were gone, too. Some one had been working on him while he was absent, taking advantage of the fact that he had only old Sandy Mullens watching the place.

The cattle inspector, Big Jim Weatherby, had warned Hamp more than once

that he was using too small a brand. The Circle S on the shoulder was neat, but it was not big enough.

Sandy Mullens should have noticed the rustling, but Hamp blamed himself for depending on the old coot. He dropped in on Sandy's cabin twice and found him gone both times. He was too busy hunting cows to have time to hunt Sandy, too. The house was empty, forlorn without Sandy's girl. Then he thought of Dot and of Dike, that bristly hog, with his numerous scandals over other men's women. . . .

Those thoughts, the idea of Dike trying to marry a girl like Dot made Hamp want to kill Dike, but he did not belt on a gun when he rode out. Hamp's father had once shot a man and it had preyed on old Dave Falconer the rest of his life. Hamp didn't want a killing on him.

One night after his riding, Big Jim Weatherby dropped by and found his ex-partner, sitting, thinking deeply. Dike had given Hamp three days to take his offer; the time was up tomorrow and Dot Mullens was expected back the next day. Hamp wasn't worried over the trouble Dike might make about the homesteading nearly as much as he was over Dike's threat to tell the girl the history of Sandy Mullens. It would destroy the girl's faith in her father, maybe in herself, to realize that she had a parent that the whole country despised. In childhood she had missed the pride in kinship that a father and mother could provide. Now she apparently thought of Sandy as the great man he claimed to be.

Big Jim Weatherby tried to make talk, but got little response from his ex-partner. Hamp was in trouble, Big Jim could see, but he wasn't yelling for help.

The trouble with Hamp was, declared Big Jim, that he was always excusing people. He was too easy. Had he, by any chance, missed any cattle, Big Jim Weatherby inquired. Hamp reluctantly admitted to a few, and Big Jim snorted a couple of times, and said he was going to bed. A fellow like Hamp should have a guardian instead of trying to be a guardian to other people. . . .

AT SUN-UP Big Jim Weatherby rode away, and later Hamp saddled and rode toward Sandy Mullens' homestead. If Sandy were gone, he'd have to hunt for him, get him back to greet his daughter.

Wind was kicking up dust in the desert country north of the Canyon Grande, promising a terrific sand-storm. Close to the Mullens' place, a moving object caught his roving eye, a horseman heading evidently toward Tiendas across the long stretch of desert. Dike Sorrell it would be. Hamp hesitated and decided to ride to the Mullens' ranch before meeting Dike. The next quarrel he had with Dike would be a showdown; Hamp had not been bluffing about running Dike out of the country.

The little ranch had changed in the few months since Dot Mullens had come to stay with her father. Morning-glories and roses clambered up over the house; the bushes and the hedge of octatilla enclosing the gardens looked attractive. Dot had worked here, brown-armed, glorying in contact with the earth, as she gloried in riding about the country with the wind whipping her sun-tanned face.

She deserved something better, Hamp mentally decided; something like his ranch, surrounded by its fine old walnut and pecan trees, with its thrifty orchard and vineyard.

Hamp sighed. Dot had probably become infatuated with Dike. Any woman would be taken in by Dike, a good spinner of yarns and handsome.

The little house was calm today. Usually a cow or bull was at the muddy pond bellowing bovine complaints, and Sandy's pet duck would be quacking contentedly

in the little water hole. But this morning the duck was absent from the tank, while Sandy's horse, unsaddled, was standing lazily in the corral.

The door was closed, and when he opened it, Hamp got the stale odor of cooking and dirty floors, and a not-so-stale aroma of whiskey. Old Sandy, taking a morning nap with head buried on arms akimbo across the table, looked up, disheveled and bleary-eyed.

"I reckon I can if I want to!" he blustered defiantly by way of salutation. "This is my homestead."

"Sure," Hamp conceded. "Can do what?"

"Eat my duck for breakfast!"

"You're drunk," Hamp announced. "You got to get over it before Dot gets back. Can't let her see you in this shape."

Mullens sat up straight. "I'll ask you not to call my daughter by her Christian name," he stated. "She and I belong to a good old family. We allow only equals to address us by our first names."

He took a drink from the bottle and got up, standing Napoleon-like with one hand thrust between the buttons of his vest.

"I've nothin' against you, Hamp," he declared tolerantly. He waved a hand, combing back his shaggy mane and endeavoring to focus his swimming vision. "But the women of my family were meant to marry men of ability, influence and power. I couldn't consider you. I'm going to sell out my holdings here, and leave for a place where we'll have neighbors of equal culture. I've sold out to Dike Sorrell."

"Sold out to Dike!" growled Hamp. "Look here, who put you on this place, and got you started here? You're not sellin' out this place; you're sellin' out to me. I got first call on any sale."

"Dike was the man that put up this house and the dam for the cattle," contended Mullens.

"For which I paid him good money, and more'n it was worth," said Hamp. He stood glaring at the old fellow. Sandy had done what a real man would never do, drunk or sober: he had sold out a friend. Hamp had rescued Sandy from a bunch of tormentors, had started him here, trusting him. Yet he was Dot's father, and for her sake, he had to be lenient, excuse the man.

"You're drunk," repeated Hamp, "and you don't know what you're saying. Just how far has this sale between you and Sorrell gone? Any writing?"

"It's finished," said Mullens. "I didn't sign no regular papers relinquishing to Dike, but I signed one that Dike said would do just as well and keep anyone from buyin' it till we get it fixed up for him to take the place over again."

"Paper!" Hamp's mind was guessing at what sort of document. "Sandy, you didn't put your name to a statement that you an' me homesteaded this place in collusion?" He circled the table and seized Mullens' shoulders in a grip that hurt. "We didn't do that and you know it. I simply gave you a lay—with a chance to build up here. Was that what the paper you signed said? That you an' me—"

"Yeah! That's it! I 'member now," Sandy confessed. "Dike used that very word—collusion. Had me sign it simply to make it a bargain. Dike said he wouldn't show the paper 'less I tried to sell out to someone besides him."

HAMP thrust the unresisting Mullens from him, sending him sprawling into a chair. "You crazy, drunken, addle-brained Siwash!" he burst out. "You gave Sorrell something that can send you an' me to the pen. He can force you to sign over your cattle and land, without paying you a cent, or he'll clap you and me both in jail. And then he'll squat on this place

and steal me blind while I'm serving time or off fightin' in court."

Sandy stared at him owlishly. Then, "Look here, my good fellow," he blustered up, "you can't talk to me like that. I'd have you understan' I'm a gen'l'man."

"You're a double-crossin', worthless old crook," said Hamp Falconer harshly. "After feeding you, branding my dogies in your mark, treating you like a human being instead of a snake, you sell me out. And I got a hundred and forty head of yearlings that have disappeared," he went on hotly. "Maybe you know something about them?"

Sandy Mullens had been laboriously coming to the conclusion that Hamp was insulting him. Cunningly he reached under the blanket at the head of his bunk, and suddenly his hand came out grasping a heavy-calibered pistol. Before Hamp could move, flame spat from the gun-muzzle. The detonation hurt Hamp's eardrums while a slug of lead tore through his shirt into his flesh, and was deflected painfully by a rib.

Before Sandy could pull the trigger again Hamp was on him. For a moment Mullens tried to put up a fight, striking and kicking as he went to the floor. He had no more chance with the rancher than a kitten with a bulldog.

Hamp got the gun, his face flushed with anger, and stood over Mullens. Hamp was sick of the whole thing. Big Jim had told him right—that Mullens was a frozen snake who, when he got warmed up, would bite Hamp. And he was sicker, thinking of Dot Mullens, Sandy's daughter.

And so, thinking of Dot, he looked up and saw her standing in the doorway. The girl must have ridden up to the corral and run to the house on hearing the shot. Standing there in riding clothes, with a neckerchief about her smooth throat, she looked twice as sweet as he had ever seen her. But she could not have come at a worse time for him. For she saw her father on the floor, bleeding from a minor cut which he had gotten when his head had scraped against a bunk board, while Hamp stood over him with a smoking gun in his hand.

"You shot him!" she gasped. "Attacked him—an old man—" She ran to her father who was sitting up, and Hamp, clamping down tight on the words he might have spoken in his defense, hurled the gun from him and strode from the house.

He could tell what Sandy Mullens had done; he could have showed her where Sandy's bullet had glanced off his ribs, but if he did that, then the girl would see her father for the drunken, crooked old reprobate that he was.

Disregarding the sharp agony of his barked rib, Hamp hurried to his horse. He and Sandy were both in a jam. That paper, added to the known fact that Hamp had established Sandy on the homestead, would cook them. No one would believe he had done it of kindness for the old man. He had to get that lying confession out of Dike's hands!

Vaulting into the saddle, he spurred off toward the trail that Dike had been taking for Tiendas, across the desert where all morning the wind had been gathering strength, and was now kicking up such clouds of sand that it was impossible at times for Hamp to see his horse's ears. Three miles of battling the steady sweep of the storm, then he was riding down a rock-strewn slope, balancing, swaying, bracing himself against the stirrups as his horse descended in short, sliding jumps. Along a shelf of baked adobe soil he raced out into the full sweep of swirling dusty desert.

He had spent little time at the cabin and he hoped Dike was not far ahead. Hamp had no gun, having thrown aside Sandy's at the cabin, nor was he carrying his car-

bine. An hour of horse-killing pace and then, topping a little rise, he saw Dike, far ahead of him.

After two more miles Hamp raised a yell. Dike turned with the shout and seeing Hamp, drew a six-shooter to fire wildly. The shots fell short and Hamp rode on. Dike, as he fled, wasted two more shots, and then noting that Hamp had produced no gun, he suddenly became brave and stopped.

Aiming deliberately as Hamp rode toward him, he fired again. Hamp's horse went down, flinging Hamp over his head. A sharp pain came to his ankle, none too strong after the bad break, but he hobbled on straight toward Dike.

DIKE stared, astonished, bewildered at that advance. Then leveled his pistol barrel. "Stay where you are," he said. "If you come on I'll kill you, you damn fool!"

But Hamp paid no heed, and Dike held his fire as the rancher came nearer.

"No use killin' yuh. I got you where I want you," grinned Dike. "I can send you to prison, and while you and the old man are lookin' out from behind the bars, I'll marry Dot."

"Don't talk prison to me," returned Hamp. "I missed plenty cattle, Dike. I got a hunch you're behind that. And there's a cattle inspector here now investigating—Big Jim Weatherby." Which was pure bluff. Big Jim was here on some other business.

"You'll call off your dogs, because I know you think too much of that girl," returned Dike. "Prove those stole steers on me, and you'll drag her father along with me to jail."

At that Hamp came to a halt. "Sandy's no good, but he never had anything to do with stealing my cattle," he said slowly.

"Didn't he?" gloated Dike. "Next time don't take in range tramps, fella. Or warm snakes by your stove."

And then Dike lost his nerve, if he had ever intended to shoot at all. As Hamp walked toward him, Dike turned his horse suddenly, and rode off at a walk, keeping a little ahead of the hobbling man. The wind was sweeping the desert with hurricane force. Hamp was hobbling painfully, choked by the dust, seeming a little dazed by his fall. Deliberately Dike taunted Hamp, leading him farther out into the desert, away from water.

Finally Dike laughed, and turned his horse to head for the Canyon Grande. Hamp turned and followed him.

"Follow me, will yuh?" Dike called jeeringly back and rode away.

He was leaving Hamp to die out here. Crippled as he was, the chances were that he wouldn't get far; he couldn't last long without water.

Overhead the sky was a dusty blanket, while curtains of choking dirt all but covered Hamp. He had put up his neckerchief, and staggered on, his boots sinking into the sand, ankle-deep with each step. There was no water before the Canyon Grande; he had carried none on his dead horse.

Stepping on his ankle became as painful as stepping barefoot on white hot iron. For two miles he struggled; then three; four. The ankle was weakening him as much as a bleeding wound. Often he stumbled and fell, to fight back to his feet and go on, toward a dry canyon that would take him to the river of the Canyon Grande. He wasn't going toward water. Water was only incidental. He was following Dike, to prevent him from dragging a girl down, beating her down with the club of her father's shame.

He bound his ankle tightly with strips torn from his shirt. That helped for awhile and he hobbled on, sweating, panting. The force of the wind was burying the whole

country and he struggled like some crippled insect across it.

Before the choking clouds he went down again, and this time he lay motionless for a long time. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Trap of the Sands

HAMP got up, after a while, to go on —a damn fool who had taken in a snake to warm by his stove! A little delirious, he began imagining things, that Big Jim Weatherby was laughing at him, and offering him snake bite vaccine. The vaccine came in a bottle shaped like a six-shooter.

Then he thought that he was caught in the quicksands of Canyon Grande with a wall of flood water coming down on him. He struggled to get free but the water rose to his chest and to his mouth. If he drowned, at least he would relieve his throat first, and so he drank greedily. He opened his eyes then, for the water was no dream.

Someone was kneeling by his side, holding a canteen to his lips. And that person was crying, while she held his head and let the water trickle down his throat.

"I was blind, Hamp," Dot Mullens was saying. I should have known about dad—that you hadn't shot him. But I saw the gun in your hand and he was bleeding. I ran after you, but you had gone. All I could do was to follow you. You had always warned me to fasten a canteen of water on my saddle and I did. I had known of course, that dad wasn't the big rancher he claimed to be. Before I left, he confessed that he had gone crazy; had fired a shot at you. "And he told me about that paper he gave Dike."

"He did?" That was a point in Sandy's favor. "And you followed me into the desert in this storm? Why?"

"Because I was afraid you'd maybe ride to meet Dike Sorrell. And I had to apologize, at once. I didn't want you to think that I was ungrateful. Nor such a fool as not to know what you'd done for dad."

Hamp got to his feet. Water, and the girl's trust in him, had brought a new strength. The pain in his ankle had changed to a numbing ache. "Dike," he muttered. "Got to find Dike. That horse you're on will carry double. We may meet Jim Weatherby. He told me he was comin' up the Tablas Canyon trail from the Canyon Grande. If we do, I'll borrow his horse. Your father and I are in a tough spot."

"It's his fault," said the girl. "After you took him in—to put himself into Dike's hands. Hamp, dad can't be all bad. He didn't know what he was doing."

"Of course, he didn't. Look here, you forget that. All of us have streaks in us. He's weak, and when he gets drunk he goes crazy. Dike must have been keeping him drunk since you went away. He's not himself." Hamp said nothing of the stolen cattle. "Your father is all right," he said firmly. And his arm went around her, to hold her close to him. "It's going to be all right," he promised.

With the horse carrying double, they rode on until they reached Tablas Canyon and descended into it, escaping the sweeping brooms of dust. They could even lope the doubly-burdened horse.

It didn't matter so much now whether or not he caught Dike. He had the girl, and nothing could take her from him! She would live with him at his brown-walled ranch house. If he went to prison, she would wait for him. He could get along without the cattle that had been stolen from him.

They were within a mile of the Canyon Grande into which Tablas Canyon emptied when they saw a welcome, familiar-looking rider jogging toward them. Big Jim Weatherby grinned as he saw the

two, and took off his hat ceremoniously as Hamp introduced him.

"You didn't happen to see a friend of mine down this way, did you?" asked Hamp.

"Said friend wouldn't be Dike Sorrel?" asked the inspector. "Sure, I saw him. He was speeding out of the country. So fast I figured he must be on his way from a murder or a stealing or mebbe something real criminal. So I took the liberty of stopping him with a gun and left him hogtied down below, close to the Canyon Grande.

"Dike seemed kind of desperate. I want him for conspiring with Heriberto Garcia in cattle stealing. I take it you'll want to make a complaint, Hamp, about Dike cutting out your small brand from the shoulder, sewing it up and rebranding and then renting said brand to Garcia. Near a hundred fifty head."

"I got no complaints," said Hamp. He guessed what brand Dike had used in place of his own: Sandy Mullens'.

BELOW, sitting against a cliff, Dike Sorrell faced them, his hands trussed behind him, his feet tied with rope.

"Don't feel sorry for me," he snarled. "If you should send me up, Falconer, you'd send somebody else along with me. But I can be bought off, Hamp. Two thousand dollars, and I leave and let bygones be bygones. You know what I mean, Hamp. I hold aces, whichever way you look at it—even if you get that paper Sandy signed. And you won't even get that." He hunched himself suddenly, surged up.

"Look out, Weatherby!" Hamp shouted as Dike came to his feet, free of his bonds. Beside Sorrell, Hamp saw a knife lying, and he guessed in a flash how Sorrell, hands trussed with Weatherby's hogging string, had contorted himself almost into a circle and managed to reach with his fingers, a sheath knife hidden in a boot top.

By infinite patience during Weatherby's absence Dike had wedged it solidly into a rock cleft and sawed through the rope at his wrists. It had taken only a stroke them to sever the bonds at his ankles, although with the three appearing just then, Dike had waited, pretending to be tied.

But the cattle inspector had not noticed the knife; he had also carelessly overlooked a small pistol carried beneath Dike's shirt. That pistol was out and in Dike's hand now as Weatherby went for his gun.

Dike fired first. Hamp saw Big Jim stagger and clap his hand to his head. Blood poured from under the big hat, and Weatherby went down.

Then with a hoarse cry, Dike ran for Weatherby's horse. Dot Mullens unhesitatingly stepped into his path. Dike threatened her with the gun, but the girl had nerve. She stood there, unswerving, as Dike clubbed his short-barreled gun and aimed a vicious blow at Dot's head. She did not cry out; Hamp saw her face become white as the gun-butt struck her, sending her staggering away.

Hamp rushed on Dike. It was natural with Hamp to think of fighting without a gun; he had never carried one in his life, with a hatred for them instilled in him by his father. Yet, unarmed, he had death in his eyes for Sorrell now. As long as Dike Sorrell was living, there would never be happiness for Dot Mullens. The man was like a malignant snake that had to be stamped out of existence.

Triggering a wild shot at Hamp, Dike turned again toward Weatherby's horse, but that animal and Dot's were both trotting off. His own had been tied up canyon by Weatherby. Dike ran after the pair of horses, but they broke in a lope. Then as Hamp, following close, yelled behind

him, Dike swung around, aiming his pistol.

Zig-zagging, with head low, not sparing his ankle, Hamp made so difficult a target that Sorrell spent the remaining bullets in his gun trying to halt the plunging assault. Then in desperation, he cast the empty gun at the oncoming man. The weapon, hitting where the shots had missed, struck Hamp a blow that should have laid him low. Instead he shook his head, and kept on. And Sorrell fled down the canyon afoot.

Running after the fleeing man for fifty yards, Hamp actually gained on him, catching Sorrell not five yards from the bank of Canyon Grande where purling flood waters had spread out from the main channel to wash boggily over sucking sands. There Sorrell, like a coyote at bay had to turn to face Hamp Falconer. With legs braced against the shock, he grappled, tore and hit; but his slashing blows were like hammering against a brick wall.

Hamp Falconer was like an insane man, almost beyond injury. He paid no heed to the crashing fists that battered at his face, but lashed out, right and left, with pile-driver strokes that beat down Dike's defense and brought a shriek of agony from Sorrell. Dike cringed away, trying to dodge, but hobbling, Hamp followed him, backing him against the bank of the stream.

"Damn you, Dike!" he gritted out. "Stand up and take it."

A smooth, piston-like drive that started from Hamp's waist fairly uncoupled Sorrell and sent him reeling backward. He shot back over the bank and as he disappeared Hamp heard him splash into the muddy liquid of Canyon Grande a few feet below.

Hamp Falconer, still raging, automatically sped on to follow up his advantage, but on the brink paused, held by the saving instinct of a man who has dealt with deadly quicksand all his life.

Dike had hit the boggy waters upright, sinking far down in the sand. Before he could recover and throw himself flat, suction claimed his feet. With a loud, frenzied cry he began at once to struggle against the unseen hands that dragged and pulled his ankles.

ON the bank Hamp Falconer stood, staring, realizing that Sorrell was in the clutch of a silent foe more relentless than buman being or animal. Standing in the sands which the waters barely covered the man struggled powerfully, but the movement of his upper legs, without response from the knees downward, was sufficient indication of the man's plight.

He made no progress; he could not raise a foot. As he tried vainly to lift himself the muscles of his face sprang out in contortions that were bestial. Dike in that treacherous mire was a man in a hideous trap. He worked with tremendous energy, but against the inexorable force that held him, all his strength had the puny effect of an insect frantically buzzing to free itself of fly-paper.

For a full minute he struggled, only to sink the more rapidly. Hoarse, animal-like cries welled up from the depths of his soul.

Then in stark terror he looked up at Hamp Falconer who stood, swaying on his feet, his face bloody with head a little lowered, staring at him. At sight of Hamp's face, Sorrell reached the depths of utter despair. Death had him branded. Even if he gained the bank, it would be only to meet another relentless attack from Hamp which would force him once more into the deadly sands.

A despairing cry oozed from lips where foam and blood mingled. "My God, Hamp!" he cried. "Don't you see I'm bogged—that I'm sinkin' fast? Fight fair! Give me a chance."

"How much of a chance did you give Weatherby?" demanded Hamp. "Or that girl? And how much chance to Sandy Mullens, dropping him into hell again, ruining a man that was struggling to make something of himself, trying to live up to being father of his daughter? Stealing cattle, putting the blame on him by stickin' his brand on 'em."

"You can't see a man die," Hamp protested.

"Can't I? I could hang you, but this is a lot better."

"But you'll never git back the money for your cattle with me buried here," went on Dike, clutching at straws. "A hundred fifty head, Hamp. I'll give up my share and see that Garcia gives up his. It's worth five thousand dollars to yuh, Hamp, to tromp me from this bog."

Dike stared down at the muck and saw he had sunk another inch.

"I'll swear to it all in court!" he shouted. "I put whiskey before Sandy, and let him smell it, and drank it before him, and offered it to him. I run off those cattle, cut your brand, burned 'em with Sandy's, and shoved 'em over to Heriberto Garcia to sell. I'll swear to all that any place you say, Hamp. I got twenty-five hundred in the bank and that I'll give you a check for and I'll get the rest from Garcia. Drag me out—tromp me loose, while there's still time."

Hamp Falconer looked down at the man, then he smiled. "Adios, damn you, Dike," he said. "You're headed where you belong—Hell."

Horrible, gasping cries came from Sorrell, as he panted in another vain effort to free himself. In his terror, piteous yells came from his throat, reverberating and echoing through the canyon from wall to wall. Alternately he pleaded with Hamp or flung savage profanity at the rancher.

Hamp turned his back, stumbling away blindly, as one under the influence of some drug, trying to shut his ears to the cries. Dike Sorrell's promises were not worth the breath it took to say them. Free, he would renounce in a moment all he had sworn.

Back up the canyon lay Weatherby in a welter of blood, perhaps Dot Mullen, too. A deadly stillness held the canyon save for the cries of the doomed man. They would not last long. Hamp was shaking, white faced, as he went stumbling away.

CHAPTER FOUR

One-Man Jury

HAMP FALCONER took half a dozen steps away from that seething quicksand, and from the man who was hopelessly trapped there. Then he stopped, his knees trembling; beads of sweat dampen his brow. In his ears rang the agonized, soul-wracking cry of the doomed Dike Sorrell.

Big Jim Weatherby and Dot Mullens were up the canyon, maybe needing help; maybe needing a doctor's care, but stronger than their need came the more pressing necessity of saving Dike Sorrell's life. It would have been kinder, easier on Dike to have shot him in cold blood. Hamp knew that always, during the rest of his life each night would be hideous as his ears rang with Sorrell's tortured cries.

Vengeance—he had tasted of its sweetness. But at the same time he realized that blood cannot pay for blood. His father's bitter regret for killing a man with a gun came to him again. How could he, Hamp Falconer, judge in the heat of hatred, whether another man should die?

Again Dike's voice came, pleading for help, begging Hamp not to leave him. No man could disregard that primeval call for help of man against nature; ignore the instinctive urge of men, even enemies, to band together to fight floods, fires, storms, the ancient and yet ever new menaces to mankind. Against his will

Hamp Falconer turned back to the man who was struggling in an agony of terror, sending out gasping appeals for help.

Dike had sunk still further; the sands seemed to suck him down with a malevolent eagerness. In vain Hamp looked along the bank for a log large enough to use as a safe path to the struggling man.

Pulling off his boots, Hamp slid down the bank and unhesitatingly stepped out into the sands which the water barely covered. At once he felt the terrible sucking force of the unseen hands below. Moving fast, keeping his legs in constant motion, he advanced until he had reached a spot a few feet from Dike. His weak ankle, almost forgotten in the stress of the struggle, was again flaming with pain.

Sorrell had sunk to his crotch, and was like a man cased in stone from his waist down. As Hamp came near, Dike flung out eager, clutching hands to grip Hamp's clothing. Hamp knocked the arms aside.

"Keep away! I'm trying to get you out!" he bellowed, and the words cut far enough through the man's fear to quiet him.

And as Hamp moved his feet up and down in the sand, battling with teeth set against the agony of the ankle, his fingers dug down around Dike's legs, bringing up the sand in handfuls. He hoped at least to free Dike sufficiently so that the exhausted man could lie belly down in the sand, and so be worked to the bank.

With his legs all but free, Dike suddenly began to fight again, clutching Hamp's shoulders, trying to draw himself by one effort from the vise that gripped him. And before Hamp could knock away the arms, the two men were both in a deadly, paralyzing embrace. It was as if Dike deliberately had tried to take his enemy with him to death. In the nick of time, Hamp hit Dike in the jaw, beating him off, and again struggled to get his own legs in motion.

During that interval, all the ground that he had gained for Dike was lost; the sand had closed in on Dike's legs again. And meanwhile Hamp was tiring; the clutch of the sands on his weak ankle was getting stronger. He was panting like a winded horse; sweat cascaded down his face. He realized that the odds were ten to one, a hundred to one, against his ever getting Sorrell out alive. In a few moments, he himself would be imprisoned, sinking into the same grave that opened for Dike. If he were to get out himself, he must leave the man, and use all his remaining energy to reach the bank. The chances of that were little more than even.

But instead of struggling toward the bank, he cursed Dike Sorrell, and continued with the last of his waning strength to dig away furiously at Dike's legs. They would both lose here, but he had to stay with Dike to the end.

Harder and harder grew the effort of reclaiming each separate foot as he churned his legs up and down in the sands. Yet actually he so dug the sand from Dike's legs, that Dike might have been able to break loose, had not Sorrell been so wearied by his previous panic-stricken efforts.

Relentlessly the sands flowed in on them, turnings legs to lead, and as Hamp fought in what he knew was a final, futile burst of energy, he heard a sudden call from the bank.

Without stopping his fight, Hamp looked up and saw Dot Mullens. To Hamp's horror, she was stepping into the bog.

HE shouted to her at once, in an agony of fear, ordering her back so harshly that the girl stared at him. He knew Dot Mullens' courage, realized that she would ignore the danger she ran in coming to their help.

"Damn you, get back," he roared again. "Back! Stay out!" And then as he saw that his orders would do no good, he ceased digging for an instant to wave an arm. "Run down-stream," he ordered. "Try to find a log." He had no hope of her finding one, but he was grabbing at any excuse to get the girl out of her insane notion of coming through the sands to their rescue.

As she hesitated there came a yell, and a rider appeared on the bank. Old Sandy Mullens on one of his ponies appeared snaking along behind him a good-sized cottonwood log. Riding perhaps on Dot's trail since the girl had left the ranch, he must have seen the plight of the men from the bank a few moments ago, and had ridden hastily to hunt a log.

Dismounting, Mullens took the rope from the end of the log, and rolled it down to the bank. The section of trunk was full twelve feet long and a foot thick.

Beside Hamp, Dike began shouting hoarsely in joy as Sandy Mullens exerted his strength to lift one end of the log, and with Dot pushing on the other end, he shoved the log far out into the bog so that it almost reached the imprisoned pair.

Immediately on his hands and knees, old Sandy Mullens began crawling along the log, which sank but little in the sand.

As Mullens came close, Dike stretched out his hands toward the old fellow, but it was to Hamp that Sandy Mullens turned. His old blood-shot eyes seemed to be pleading for forgiveness from Falconer.

"I'll try to make it up to yuh, Hamp," he muttered. "Only man that was ever white to me, and I almost shot you!" And from the safety of the log, he leaned over and began digging about Hamp's legs.

"Dike first," said Hamp. "He's in deeper than I am."

"You're the closer," said Sandy Mullens, and there was a queer look in his old eyes as he stared squarely at Hamp. "Dike isn't in so deep that there isn't plenty of time to git him out later."

On the bank, Dot Mullens watched, with an anxiety mingled with pride as she saw her father rescuing these men, reaching down to scoop out the sand from about Hamp's legs. Now Falconer was able to work his legs again and to move nearer the log. There, helped by Sandy, he climbed up on the cottonwood trunk. He was so exhausted that he nearly fell into the bog again.

"Get to the bank," Sandy ordered brusquely. "You're all in, lad. Your old pal, Weatherby, was asking for you up above. Go on up with Dot and rest a while. You'll be no help here, and I can easily get this fellow out."

Dot, standing at the bank end of the log, was reaching out hands to steady him, and Hamp came ashore, to stand there watching Sandy as he began briskly to dig at Sorrell's legs.

"Take him up to Weatherby, Dot," ordered Sandy irascibly as the two people stood there watching him. "Can't you see he's all in? You two can't help me any."

It was true that Hamp was weakened almost to the point of dropping. The girl's arm went around him to steady him, while Hamp looked at old Sandy Mullens curiously.

"Better climb up on my horse and ride up," suggested Sandy as he stopped work a moment. "Go on up and get out of the sun. For what I did to you, my boy," he went on, speaking to Hamp, "I am sorry. I haven't been myself since I lost Dot's mother. No one could help me, not even you, and I almost killed you in return. Good luck," he said softly, smiling at his daughter. "You go on along with Hamp, Dot. He's a good boy. He tried to reform me. A great mistake that was, but through it you two met. Maybe it was worth it," he said as Sorrell began to curse him.

"Too bad that you didn't let him die, here, Hamp," Sandy went on. "That would have settled many things. Dike's the sort that will always make trouble for you."

Hamp nodded as Dot helped him on Sandy's horse, and then climbed up behind him. He thought how strange it was that he had had to go back to Dike, knowing that Dike would be making trouble for them all. He would try to involve Sandy Mullens in his stealing, and drag Sandy to prison with him if they tried to prosecute.

WITH Dot's arm around him as support, Hamp rode up the canyon toward Weatherby. Big Jim, the girl said, had been slashed along the head by Dike's bullet, but she was sure that there had been no fracture.

When they reached the cattle inspector, they found him on his feet, moving about uncertainly, like a man coming out of a daze. He looked at Hamp, and shook his head.

"Always told you your brand was too small," he mumbled. "But we'll put the screws on Heriberto Garcia and make him talk. And make him and Dike disgorge the money for those rustled steers."

Dismounting, Hamp sat down with his back to the cliff. Dot gave him a drink from Big Jim's canteen and he closed his eyes, resting for a few moments.

Just how long he was there he didn't know; he sat up with a start suddenly, wondering why Sandy and Dike had not appeared. Hamp decided to hustle back down to see what was keeping the pair. He would ride Sandy's horse while Dot stayed with Weatherby.

In the saddle again, Hamp spurred the horse into a trot, and then as he saw the bank by the quicksands was empty, he shoved the pony into a lope. The two should have been there in plain sight, resting.

On the bank where he had a clear view of the stream he pulled up his horse to stare in astonishment. There was in sight only the cottonwood log. The water had flowed over the treacherous sands again and there was nothing in its unbroken smoothness to hint at the menace hidden below.

Hamp bent forward in the saddle. There *was* something to be seen. An old hat, belonging to Sandy Mullens, lay not far from the log.

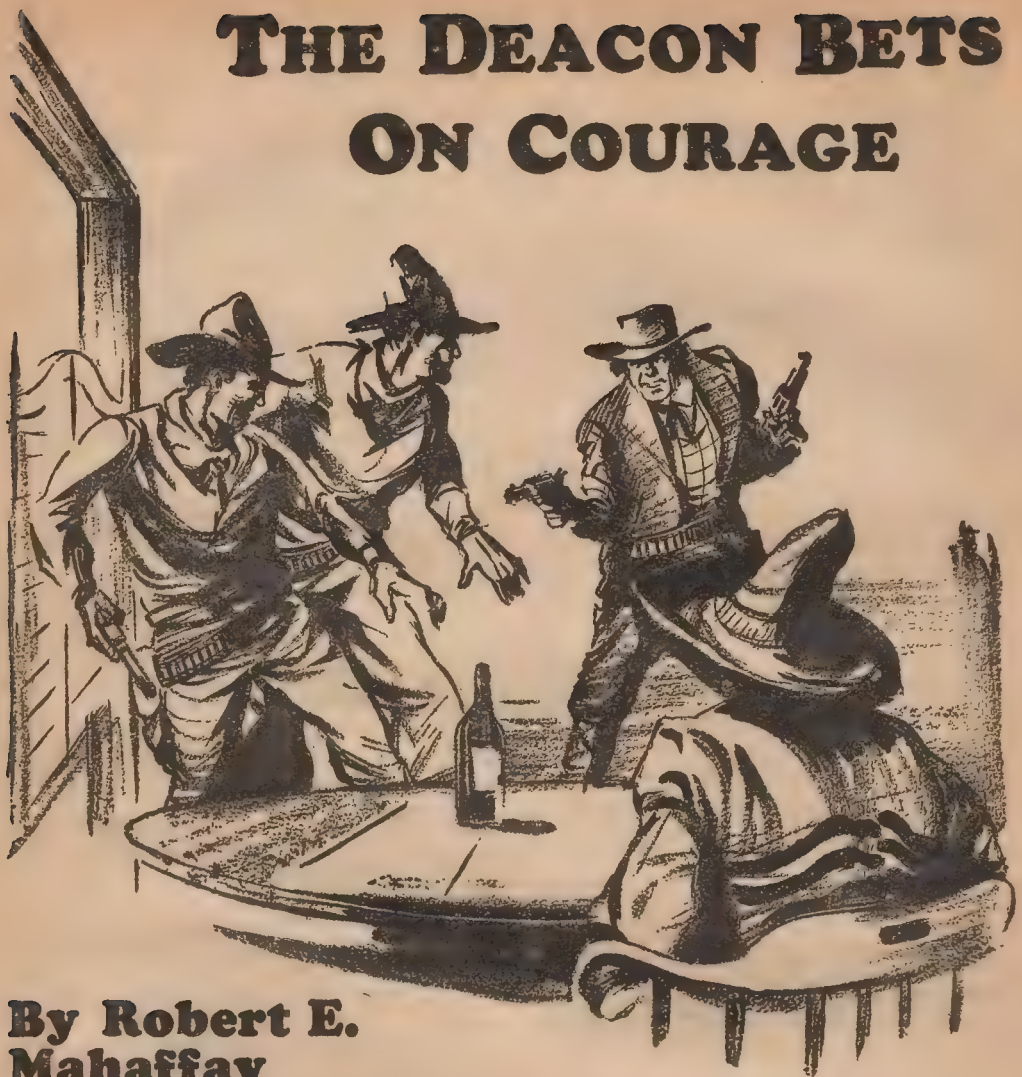
An inkling came to Hamp then of what had happened here, a guess which on the face of it was wild, impossible, and then was suddenly certainty in his mind. Sandy Mullens, instead of rescuing Dike Sorrell, had deliberately flung himself on the exhausted Dike, had borne him down into the sands. Perhaps with fingers clutched tightly about Dike's throat to stifle the man's cries for help. Staying there with him, as the two had sunk deeper and deeper, the swiftness of their descent was aided by their wild struggles.

Old Sandy Mullens must have realized that he was better off dead than alive, making retribution to Hamp in the only way open to him, taking himself out of the way, and taking with him the menace to the happiness of his daughter and the man she loved.

Bewildered, shocked, Hamp Falconer stared down unbelievingly at the quiet waters that flowed so smoothly here far from the main channel. He stared at the hat lying by the cottonwood log, a mute gesture of farewell from Sandy Mullens. Farewell from a little drunken bum, with strength enough to will his own death and that of his enemy. A weak old sot with the iron in him at the last to be judge, jury, and executioner; to make amends for some part of the wasted years of his life. . . .

THE END

The Deacon Bets On Courage



By Robert E. Mahaffay

(Author of "The Sin of Deacon Bottle," etc.)

Deacon Bottle could not forget how that wounded, half-pint oldster had tried to draw his gun against two bad hombres when there was no hope for him at all.

DEACON BOTTLE'S practised inspection told him instantly that the man was hurt—badly hurt. Sheer nerve held him erect as he pushed through the swinging doors of the Desert Eagle Saloon from the sun-sprayed street.

Though it was mid-afternoon and the saloon was deserted, Deacon Bottle, gun-juggling purveyor of the Gospel in Latigo, had been watching the door sharply for newcomers in the thus far futile hope of receiving an invitation to drink. For the good Deacon had been enduring a bleak period of pious abstemiousness, due to the fact that he was utterly and completely broke.

By some miracle of concentration the little stranger reached the bar, stood there rigid, both hands gripping the curved-up lip. "Whiskey," he muttered to Rig

Haines who had turned from the back-bar, where he had been sorting out bottles, to serve him.

From his private chair in the rear corner of the saloon Deacon Bottle quickly listed his impressions of the stunted newcomer. He could see the dark, wet spot just above the man's belt on the left side which the bar concealed from Haines; half of a mustached face that was old and seamed, bloodless now under its indelible coppery make-up applied by wind and sun; a black-handled gun slung low in a much-scarred cross-draw holster on his left thigh—the weapon of a gunman—and a saddle-bag, the supporting buckle of which had been shot away, trailing by its strap from one tightly clenched fist. But, aside from those physical details, the Deacon knew he was looking at raw courage, and the thought warmed him strangely.

The Deacon was freeing his knees from the folds of his black frock coat and rising, when a commotion at the door halted him. Something prompted him to sink back and remain motionless.

Two men came blundering in from the street with that wary speed which indicates hasty flight or purposeful pursuit. The latter appeared to be the case as, crouching just inside, their glances flinging over the dim interior, they spied the little stranger by the bar.

He, having tossed down his drink, had half turned toward the front, supporting his back against the bar.

Cat-footed, the two men paced cautiously toward him. Both wore guns, but for the moment something prevented them from drawing. "Afraid of him," the Deacon murmured to himself.

Obscured by the dimness in his corner, the Deacon had gone unnoticed. He moved quietly now, pushing back the flaps of his frock coat and allowing one pudgy hand to settle on the grips of a silver-mounted revolver. Why he did it he could not have told; but something in the fighting heart of the sorely-wounded oldster had touched an answering chord in Deacon Bottle.

His mild blue eyes livened by a glint of light, the Deacon watched the two men. He knew neither of them. They were both stockily built, though the one on the left—a sour-faced renegade with one eye half shut—was a head taller. His companion boasted exceptionally broad shoulders and a thick-featured countenance smudged by a quarter-inch of uncut beard.

Half a dozen feet away from the little stranger, they stopped. "Hell," the bearded man growled. "The old coot's dyin' on his feet."

The stubby, mustached stranger was bracing himself with his left hand against the bar. He was shivering, not from fear but from weakness.

"Not quite," he said, his words coming in stumbling jerks. "I'll have—time—to get—you rats—an'—an' Hale, too."

No one spoke after that. The little stranger, with a desperate summoning of his frayed strength, crossed his right hand to the butt of his pistol, began to lift it. The movement was slow, terribly slow, but terribly determined.

FASCINATED, the Deacon stared. What he was witnessing created a lump in his throat. He knew that that draw would never be finished. And the little oldster must have known it too; yet he was beginning it.

Gunman, killer, lawman, outlaw—whatever the oldster was, he had courage.

Only sneering contempt had up to this point prevented the two others from ending the matter. The desperate effort of the little stranger ceased; his eyes closed; he swayed on his feet. The bearded renegade bent forward, lips parting; one hand darted to his hip.

"Hey, there," shouted Rig Haines, see-

ing belatedly what was taking place. But he could not have stopped it. The sour-faced man whipped out a gun, covering him.

In the next fraction of a second the thing would have ended there had not Deacon Bottle surged to his feet. His booming voice rang with the penetrating vigor of a trumpet call through the saloon.

"Hold on, boys! First man that starts throwin' lead'll stop some!"

It was Deacon Bottle's old weakness—interfering on a hunch in business which did not concern him, when he knew none of the facts in the case. But the Deacon was angry now, angry at the thought of the cold-blooded murder which would have been done before his eyes.

One of his silver-mounted guns was out and boring ominously at the two killers as he pushed away from the table and came striding ponderously toward them. "Get the hell out of here!" he roared, his wrath mounting with each word that he spoke.

The two whirled toward him, but their weapons dangled. There was an indefinable threat in the Deacon's eyes, and a decidedly concrete threat in his gaping gun muzzle. Before his raging ire they stumbled backwards.

"Shoot a man who's got the guts this one has, will you!" boomed the Deacon.

The burly Rig Haines had snatched up a sawed-off shotgun. "If you're needin' help, Deacon," he proffered calmly.

But just then Deacon Bottle was in need only of something to restrain his temper which was dangerously close to inciting him to serious damage. Step by step he backed the two killers to the door. "An' when you get outside, keep going," he warned them menacingly, "or by the bonfires of hell, you'll wish you had!"

The savage insistence of the Deacon's manner had brooked no opposition, but by the time they had reached the swinging portals the effect of it was wearing off.

Snarling, the sour-faced man hesitated there. "Mister," he pointed out sullenly, "you got a break this time. Next time you won't be so lucky."

"I hope not," returned the Deacon fervently. "Now start humpin'."

When he had watched them out of sight and returned, he found burly, red-faced Rig Haines bending over the prone figure of the diminutive stranger.

"By Golly, Deacon," Haines blurted, "this feller's bad hurt. Couple of ribs busted an' a slug in his side."

DEACON BOTTLE, ever practical and cool-headed in such matters, was examining the saddle-bag. What he found therein made him purse his plump lips in a whistle which sprang not altogether from surprise. He had more than half expected something of the kind. Before Haines, busy with a cloth and a pan of cold water, could investigate too, he closed it carefully. Packets of bank-notes, bound with strips of paper bearing the seal of the Winton Bank, were no things for the honest Haines to become involved with, in the Deacon's opinion.

Deacon Bottle studied the seamed face of the little oldster. "Anything on him tellin' who he is?" he demanded. And when a search of his pockets produced no identifying documents, he nodded sagely, as if an inner belief had been confirmed.

"We better get hold of Sheriff Starling," suggested Haines.

Deacon Bottle shook his head. "No use troublin' Starling," he protested mildly. "Look here, Rig. Them two gun-throwers was after this gent's scalp, an' I reckon they still mean to get it. What we better do is stow him away someplace where they can't get at him, till he gets well enough to handle himself, anyhow."

"Get well?" snorted Haines. "He's more'n likely to die."

"Not him, Rig. His kind have to be took apart an' scattered 'fore they kick in. You got a storeroom some place in back, ain't you, with a door that ain't busted in, an' a key to it?"

"You mean you ain't goin' to call a sawbones or nothin'?" protested Haines."

"Hell, man, there ain't nothin' short of the Black Plague I can't doctor in a pinch. You got a room, ain't you?"

Still objecting plaintively, the reluctant Haines admitted that he had. When the stranger had been transported to it, his wound bandaged with a skill the bartender would not have believed Deacon Bottle possessed, and the precious saddlebag stowed behind a battery of whiskey kegs, the Deacon wiped the sweat from his smooth and pinkish countenance.

"The Lord sure don't spare His servants in the matter of work," he exclaimed mildly. "Tell you what, Rig—keep this business under your hat. Nothing happened here, understand? Do that for me, will you?"

Without much enthusiasm Haines agreed and the Deacon added: "I'll take the key, Rig. There's something I want to look into."

Ambling out of the Desert Eagle, Deacon Bottle headed for the office of Sheriff Enoch Starling, intending to place a few judicious questions and clear up the matter of those bank-notes which bore the mark of the Winton Bank. The Deacon, who, in a manner of speaking, was no novice himself at extracting money from supposedly impregnable sources, was mildly curious.

IN the doorway he halted only long enough to hear Starling's rumbling voice demanding: "Got clean away with it, eh?"

"I got reason to think they're here in Latigo—the three of 'em," came the snapping reply.

Innocence stamped upon his benign features, Deacon Bottle pushed inside. Enoch Starling, rugged, long-mustached lawman of Latigo, looked up frowning at the Deacon's entrance.

"Oh, you, Deacon. Come on in. Bank over at Winton was broke into this morning, Deacon. This here's Brick Hale, deputy from there. Deacon Bottle," he explained to the deputy, "does the preachin' we get here in Latigo—blamed good at it he is, too."

The Deacon found himself staring at a lean, hawk-faced individual who had an unpleasant habit of eyeing a man as if his presence were permitted only under sufferance. And beneath that annoying intolerance the Deacon thought he detected a craftiness which would make no distinction between honesty and crookedness.

"Yeh, I've heard of the Deacon," grunted Hale. "Does most of his preachin' with a whiskey bottle for a pulpit, don't he?"

"It ain't *where* the Lord's work is done, it's *how* its done," corrected the Deacon piously, but there were wicked lights dancing in his eyes. "Got any idea, have you, Hale, who done the bank job?"

"I've got first-class descriptions of all three," returned Hale promptly.

Deacon Bottle coughed slightly. "You was there at the time, was you?"

The deputy reddened. "Well, yes, I was. Traded some lead with 'em, but I got a knock on the head that put me out for a spell. That's how they got away. I put a bullet in one of 'em first, though."

"What'd they look like?" inquired the Deacon, though by this time there were no doubts whatever in his mind.

He listened carefully to Hale's brief descriptions. No question about it. The three men he had seen in the Desert Eagle were the three culprits. The Deacon sighed. He had liked the little stranger—

the wrinkled oldster who carried his revolver like a gunman, and who had a brand of courage which few men could equal. Nevertheless, there was apparently more to the story than the deputy knew. Why had the two others been so anxious to do away with the old fellow? Had he double-crossed them? Not likely, the Deacon told himself.

"If it's all right I'll take a look around," suggested Hale bluntly.

"Sure, sure," agreed Starling. "I'll go along myself. If they're here we'll rout 'em out." He caught a look from Deacon Bottle and added. "I'll be along in a minute."

When the deputy had stepped outside the Deacon stated calmly: "Sometimes, Enoch, them outside the law look like better men than them inside it."

"I know," the sheriff admitted ruefully. "I don't like him myself. Never have. Though I reckon he's straight enough."

"Know anything about him, Enoch?"

"Not much. He ran for sheriff at the last election. Didn't get it. They put in a new feller over there. Gent with a rep, I understand. Never have met him. Hale didn't like it much, but it seems this other gent was a pretty decent sort of a guy, an' he took Hale on as deputy. Which wasn't such a bad idea, 'cause Hale ain't nobody's fool."

Deacon Bottle chuckled. "Maybe so, Enoch, but I hope he don't find 'em. Be seein' you."

OUT in the street Deacon Bottle decided one thing immediately. Already dusk was sending down a thin haze from the North Hills, and by dark or shortly after, he must have the wounded stranger out of Latigo. Rig Haines would stand by his word to the Deacon, but it was probable that he would have more qualms than the Deacon when he discovered that he was harboring a suspected bank robber in the Desert Eagle. Honest and hard-working, Rig Haines was anxious to keep the name of the Desert Eagle unblemished.

For another thing, even the Desert Eagle was not safe. Unless Deacon Bottle were mistaken in his estimate of the man, Brick Hale would give Latigo a thorough going-over if he believed his quarry to be there.

Deacon Bottle made his decisions quickly, and acted upon them with equal speed. Five minutes later he had borrowed a rig, on credit, from the livery stable and was pulling it up at the rear of the Desert Eagle Saloon. That he was seriously implicating himself, he did not pause to consider. It was common talk that many of the Deacon's exploits were considerably more unlawful than lawful—the matter of righteousness never entering into the law's calculations. "Wanted or not," he confided to himself, "I'd bet my guns on the little feller. The kind of guts he's got don't come with ordinary gents. I'll be hung 'fore I'll turn him over to Hale."

The little stranger was still unconscious when the Deacon let himself quietly into the storeroom. But he was breathing more regularly and the blood had ceased to flow from his wound.

Carefully, gripping the saddle-bag under one elbow, Deacon Bottle carried the limp figure out and stretched him in the bed of the buckboard. Over him he bunched a tarp, and climbing laboriously into the seat slapped the reins over the rumps of the team. With a creaking rattle they swung at a trot up the alley.

Half way to the corner two figures loomed up through the dimness of early night, and Deacon recognized the tall, angular frame of Enoch Starling and the lean Hale. Muttering a phrase which would not have fitted well into any sermon, Deacon Bottle let one of his hands brush the gun at his thigh. He had gone

too far now to back down. Come what would, he was not going to let down his unconscious passenger.

"Who's there?" he heard Hale demanding. "Who's that in the rig?"

"Blamed if I—why, hell, it's the Deacon," Starling was replying. "What in the devil you up to Deacon?"

"Drivin'," submitted Deacon Bottle meekly. "Just takin' a turn 'fore I go to bed."

Hale snorted suspiciously. "The hell you say. What you got under this tarp?" He reached forward to jerk it free.

"Easy, now," said the Deacon with a sharp plaintiveness, though in the darkness his hand was very close to his gun. "Don't go lookin' under there. It'll ruin my reputation if you do."

"Ruin your reputation, you damn' fool. What d'you mean?"

"Well, I didn't want to be caught at it. Fact is, boys—Now don't go to judgin' me too harsh when I tell you."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Well, bein' a deacon, you see, I don't like to do my drinkin' in public. Folks don't understand. So now an' then after dark I tote a case or two out into the hills an' cache it for such times as I need strengthenin' for the work of the Lord. But, hang it all," he complained with a false bitterness, "I don't like to be caught at it. Don't say nothin', will you, boys?"

The deputy stepped back. "Well of all the blamed, big-bellied souses. Go on out an' swill till you're black in the face."

In the darkness the Deacon grinned as he laid the reins over the team. Jolting on his way, he heard Starling announcing in a mystified tone: "First time I ever heard of *that.* Most of the time the Deacon'll belly up to the bar an' put 'em down as fast as—"

PROBABLY no man within fifty miles knew that particular section of the lofty North Hills more thoroughly than did Deacon Bottle. Engagement in more than one somewhat nefarious enterprise had made that accurate acquaintance a necessity.

Consequently his disposal of the wounded man was a model of sign obliteration, a minor masterpiece of concealment. In the North Hills, his favorite haunts, the Deacon could have hidden a dead horse from a buzzard.

With the moon shedding a faint, warm glow over the spot, Deacon Bottle settled his patient as comfortably as he could under a ledge of rock at the head of a narrow gulch. Following that, he opened the saddle-bag to examine once again its valuable cargo. He removed a sheaf of tens from one of the packets and stuffed the bills casually into the breast pocket of his coat. There had been certain expenses which the Deacon felt duty bound to pay. The rental of the buckboard, for example. In addition to that, the events of the afternoon had increased the yearning of his throat for alcoholic soothing to a torturing demand. Deacon Bottle began to beam involuntarily as he pictured himself with a quart or so of Old Pepper in the inviting surroundings of the Desert Eagle.

He was still tucking in the last edges of the currency when he turned back to the wounded man. He discovered with some surprise that the little strangers eyes were open and regarding him steadily. Apparently the rough punishment of the ride had been enough to bring him back, for a moment at least, to consciousness.

"Expense money," explained the Deacon cheerfully. "How you making out, old-timer?"

But the little old fellow did not answer and the lids of his eyes dropped shut again. It seemed as if he had never opened them at all, but the Deacon swore to himself that even in the moonlight he could not

have been mistaken. "Anyhow," he assured himself aloud, "he ain't dead. That's something."

And with that, after a final inspection of the splints and bandage, he went plodding sedately off to the buckboard which he had abandoned more than a mile from the spot. Anyone trailing that buckboard would end up in a maze of intertwining gullies and draws.

Convinced that his troubles were over, Deacon Bottle headed the team toward Latigo, whistling softly. As he drew abreast of the sheriff's office the flooding light from the open door revealed him. Then two figures were blocking out the opening.

A voice, high-pitched with anger, roared: "There he is! There he is!"

And Sheriff Enoch Starling's heavy tones boomed: "Damn it all, Deacon. Come in here!"

Because there was nothing else to do, Deacon Bottle climbed reluctantly down and made his way into the office. There was a certain tightness around his smooth plump jaw, and his mild blue eyes were so innocent that they should have held a warning. Frowning in honest perplexity, Enoch Starling closed the door behind him.

The deputy, Hale, was pale with anger. The muscles of his lean, hawkish face were taut. His insolent intolerance had given way to a blind fury which, to the shrewd eyes of the Deacon, seemed all out of proportion to the nature of the crime involved.

"Lock him up, Starling!" he shouted. "He done it. By God, he's the man!"

"Shut up," interposed Starling roughly. "I'm runnin' this county for a while yet. Deacon, what the hell do you mean by haulin' one of them bank robbers out of town?"

"Me, Enoch? You're jokin'. What would I be doin', fooling around with bank robbers?"

"Now look here, Deacon," said Starling sharply. "You're on damned dangerous ground. If you get mixed up in this there's nothin' I can do to help you out. Better throw up your hand an' tell us where he is."

DEACON BOTTLE raised his eyebrows in mock bewilderment. He was playing a part, but the deadly seriousness underlying the situation did not escape him. Without appearing to, he was watching Hale narrowly. "Blamed if I can figger out what you're driving at, Enoch," he complained.

"Damn it," raged Hale, "can't you see he's lying, Starling? He was in on the job, that's what he was."

Hale was fast losing all control of himself. And the real reason for his overwhelming wrath baffled the Deacon. His fists were clenching and unclenching, and sweat was starting out on his forehead. The look of a killer was glittering from his eyes. He went on, his voice hoarse with passion: "He must have been one of 'em, I tell you. He snaked the wounded feller out of the Desert Eagle and hid him someplace in the hills."

"Sho now," protested Deacon Bottle. "You didn't look under that tarp in the buckboard—an' nobody else did. You'll have your hands full provin' what I had in it."

"Smart, ain't you?" snarled Hale. "We got plenty on you, mister. The bandit went into the saloon. We know that. You doctored him a little an' hid him out till you could get a rig to haul him away in."

With a deceptive indifference the Deacon turned to Starling. "Have you talked to Rig Haines? Can he help you out any?"

"Couldn't get a word out of him," retorted the sheriff.

"Then how the hell," demanded Deacon Bottle of Hale, "did you find all this out—if it should be true, which I ain't admittin'." Only two besides himself and Haines knew what had transpired in the saloon, and those two were the bank robbers. Was it possible that the deputy had gotten his information from them?

"It ain't hard to guess what happened," answered Hale surlily.

Deacon Bottle shrugged. "Guesses never branded any calves in court. How about them other two safe-crackers? 'Cording to your story they're around here somewhere's. Seems to me you're pretty anxious to corral one pore little feller who's supposed to be half dead anyhow."

"I'll do my sheriffin' in my own way," Hale snarled.

"Your *deputy* sheriffin'," reminded the Deacon, more out of mild malice than anything else.

Furiously Hale opened his mouth to speak, but Starling cut him off. "Hold on a minute, Deacon. There's somethin' I want to say to you straight. I ain't sayin' you was in on that robbery, but I am sayin' that it's beginnin' to look like it." He went over and laid a hand affectionately on the Deacon's broad shoulder, and for a moment that staunch friendship which had existed between the two men for years flared up in their locked glances.

"For your own good, Deacon, pull out of this," begged Starling. "Bank robbery is a blamed serious charge. An' if it comes to trial, folks who've lost their money ain't goin' to bother much about who looked into what wagon. A jury in Winton wouldn't be like a jury in Latigo. Regardless of how much actual proof they had, if they thought you was in on the job they'd give you the works. This is straight out, between you an' me, Deacon."

There was almost nothing that Deacon Bottle would not have done for Enoch Starling. But this—this was different. The Deacon wondered if Starling, had their places been reversed, would not be doing what he himself was doing. But Starling was the law, and there were certain things he could not be told. The Deacon could not tell Starling, because he could not forget the picture of the little stranger trying valiantly to draw his gun when there was not the faintest hope of his getting it out in time. Whatever else the little gunman might be, he was a man. And come what might as the result of his action, Deacon Bottle could not betray him.

"Tell you what," said the Deacon wearily, "in the morning I'll have a look around in the hills—alone, you understand," and he let his gaze rest on Hale. "Might be I could find somethin', though I ain't guaranteeing it. Right now I'm thirsty an' sleepy, an' I figger to grab a little of both."

"You ain't going to let him get out of here with that kind of a story, are you?" shouted Hale furiously.

But Starling was regarding Deacon Bottle keenly, as if trying to probe out some fact which lay beneath his simple statement. "You've got no real proof to hold him on, Hale," he stated quietly. "Until you get it, the Deacon goes and comes as he likes."

"You'll be responsible then," Hale snapped, and he slammed out of the office in a black rage.

DEACON BOTTLE followed him with deliberate slowness. He dared not trust himself alone with Starling. He returned the rig to the livery stable and, while it was late by this time, repaired to the Desert Eagle, settling himself in his favorite corner with a quart of Old Pepper.

He had decided what he was going to do. It was, actually, the only course open to him. In the morning he would take

the little stranger deeper into the hills, out of the country. Well before dawn he would leave. He knew that, contrary to Brick Hale's threat, Enoch Starling would not suffer as a result of it. Starling was in the clear. He had had no actual proof on which to hold the Deacon. A little later, when the thing had blown over, the Deacon could return—so at least he told himself. But deep in his heart a voice whispered that he was taking a more decisive step than he would admit; that his flight would seal the suspicion that he had been involved in the robbery.

Thus his thoughts went laboriously over and over the matter, and as the level of whiskey in the bottle lowered, he dozed.

When he opened his eyes again it was to observe with a start of chagrin that dawn was not an hour off and that Rig Haines was turning out the last stragglers among the night's revelers. Deacon Bottle swung his ponderous frame upright with a curse of annoyance. He could not reach the wounded man's hiding place now before it was light. And he had to go, for the man would require food and attention soon if his life were to be saved. It was the Deacon's weakness for whiskey which had betrayed him, and for once he swore roundly at the affliction.

Hurriedly he obtained from the bartender a package of food and another bottle, staving off an inevitable flow of questions. Ten minutes later he was jogging toward the North Hills with a second horse in tow. The wounded man might not be able to ride, but he would have to, he told himself grimly. While he felt reasonably sure that no one had observed his departure from Latigo, some sixth sense warned him that he was being followed. He tried to shake off the feeling as a product of his imagination.

In the first gray light of dawn he dismounted and studied the trail carefully. The mark of the buckboard, going and coming, was easily discernible. But he saw too that a pair of riders had also passed up that trail—and there was no sign that they had returned!

Deacon Bottle pondered that, wondering who they were. Something told him that they were the two renegades he had met in the Desert Eagle, and that they had not gone down by a different route. They were still in the hills.

Thereupon the Deacon left the trail and pressed on by as circuitous and hidden a route as he could devise. But two horses and a man cannot move and remain concealed entirely. Realizing that, Deacon Bottle downed a cupful of the whiskey which had caused the difficulty, and set off again with all the speed he could summon.

Fifty yards from the ravine in which he had placed the wounded man, he left the horses and crawled in on foot. The little stranger was still lying under the protecting ledge with his eyes closed. Deacon Bottle adjusted the bandage which had twisted out of position during the night, and then fished out the whiskey. A few drops poured between his lips caused the patient's lids to fly up; he moved his right arm and a succession of indistinguishable sounds came from his throat.

Deacon Bottle chuckled. "We're pullin' out of here, feller," he advised amiably. "Feel up to it?"

At that moment he heard the spat of lead striking rock, and granite splinters chipped against his low-crowned black hat from above. The report of the shot came echoing faintly.

The Deacon did not move. The sound had told him that the marksman was too far distant to be dangerous for a time yet. He wasted no time over the fact that his advance to the spot had been witnessed. He was rapidly calculating the place's suitability for defense and the possibility of making an escape from it.

A voice, weak but grimly humorous,

interrupted him. "You ain't as gun-shy as some, pardner."

DEACON BOTTLE glanced down to the seamed and bloodless face of the oldster and grinned. "Not much need to be, long as we stay here." He gestured with one pudgy hand above and below them. "Anybody comin' up from below can't get close enough to do much damage, an' from them ridges up yonder the angle ain't right. Ledge cuts 'em off. Come dark we'll slide out of here."

"Whoever's doin' that shootin' has a rifle, an' all you got is your short gun."

"Sure," nodded the Deacon, "but he can't get a decent shot at us till he comes inside six-gun range."

"Know who the gent is?"

"I got an idea. One of them partners of yours. I reckon the other's around somewheres."

A few minutes later that statement was corroborated by a gun which began to snarl from below them. From then on the two rifles, one above and the other below, maintained a steady chatter. The whine of ricochetting lead filled the little ravine.

Deacon Bottle crawled to the lower end of it and inspected the country which stretched, rough and broken, down from the mouth. The fire, he rightly judged, was being continued for the time being only for the purpose of preventing their escape until the attackers could draw in.

A plume of dust far to the south and east caught his attention. A third rider, coming from the direction of Latigo. "Brick Hale, most likely," the Deacon muttered to himself. "Holdin' off three of 'em ain't going to be a cinch."

He lost the newcomer among the tangled hog backs, but some half hour later his arrival was announced by the cracking of a rifle from a wooded hillside not more than two hundred yards to the east.

The hours dragged very slowly on. Very dull hours they were, but very deadly. Deacon Bottle shot sparingly, conserving his shells, his one purpose being to hold the men off until dark. From three points of the compass the three attackers closed in slowly but steadily. A grim look had come over the Deacon's moon-like face, and he was squinting more often at the westering sun. A conviction was creeping over him that the sun would not dip behind the hills soon enough.

The odds were too unequal. He could not adequately guard the three fronts at once, and he knew that sooner or later a chance shot was due to find him out. When they made their rush, as they were bound to, he would be caught between three lanes of fire. The Deacon wiped away the perspiration which was streaming down over his forehead. Well, he would make the best of it. He had made his choice, back there in Latigo. He had no one to blame but himself. Enoch Starling had warned him more truly than he had thought.

The Deacon realized suddenly that there had been no shooting for many minutes. He heard a rustling sound behind him and whirled sharply.

The little gunman, his wrinkled face contorted by the pain of the effort, was crawling from under the ledge on his hands and knees. He stopped by the Deacon, and sitting with his back braced against the low wall of rock, drew his gun from its holster. Carefully, making each movement with a jerky deliberateness, he cocked the pistol and laid it across his knees.

"They're up to somethin'," was all he said. "Figgerin' to jump us, I reckon."

THEY waited there together, the wizened little stranger and the portly Deacon Bottle. And the Deacon was not sorry he had done as he had.

From the east three quick shots rang

out briskly. Some sixty feet below the mouth of the ravine a man leaped to his feet and came charging up the slope. Without looking the Deacon understood that the same thing was taking place above and to the east of them.

Out of the silence rose a clamoring burst of shots. Deacon Bottle shot twice at the running figure in his range of vision, and missed. Smoke sifted up from his gun muzzle, hanging in the still air, and he waved it aside. He could hear the roar of explosions behind him as the wounded oldster shot with his gun propped up on his knees.

Someone was shouting, ripping out curses. Bullets chunked into the rock close beside him. The Deacon was conscious that the heat in the narrow little ravine was stifling. He shot again at the man coming up the slope, his gun spouting flame. It was the sour-faced outlaw with the drooping eye-lid, he saw then. The man wavered, stopped with his legs spraddled out and bent at the middle, as if to pick something up from the ground. But his hands were pressed to his stomach. He fell forward and lay there, his body jerking.

Deacon Bottle spun around. The little gunman was croaking something, but the Deacon's ears were ringing so that he could not hear it. He saw that the bearded outlaw was sprawled with his broad shoulders half over the ledge of the ravine. He had gotten no further. A six-gun was dangling from his lifeless fingers.

Then the Deacon heard what it was that his companion was trying to make him hear. "Get Hale! Get Hale!"

With his two men already down, the deputy had whipped around and was streaking for the timber which he had left. The bullets remaining in the Deacon's silver-mounted guns failed to stop him.

Deacon Bottle shook his head. "No luck. He's got a horse in there, too, I reckon. By God, though, wait a minute! There's Enoch!"

In the trying last minutes of the encounter a tell-tale dust sign from the direction of Latigo had passed unnoticed. As the Deacon watched the timber, he picked up Starling as he came over a ridge a quarter of a mile beyond.

Without speaking Deacon Bottle watched the scene as it unfolded. Hale came spurring hard out of the timber. He saw Starling, swerved, found there was no other path, and cut back straight at him. A puff of smoke fled back from his racing figure. Starling's mount reared, and the sun glittered suddenly on a gun in the Latigo sheriff's hand. A tiny bloom of flame burst from the muzzle, and Hale, clawing madly at the empty air, toppled backwards over the rump of his horse.

Minutes later Sheriff Enoch Starling came riding up to the ravine. He dismounted and strode immediately to the little stranger, thrusting out his hand. "Grantham, ain't it?"

"That's right," returned the olster laconically. "Glad to know you, Starling. Hell of a county you got here."

The sheriff turned to Deacon Bottle. "Why in the devil didn't you tell me?" he demanded accusingly.

"Tell you what?" Deacon Bottle ruefully regarded his black hat which had been torn twice by bullets. Much mystified, he was stalling for time.

"Why, that this here is Sheriff Bill Grantham from Winton. Bein' handed the double-cross by his deputy. Damn the Deacon anyhow," he complained, returning to the little gunman. "Always keeps his fool schemes to himself. How'd it all happen, Grantham?"

THE wizened oldster tugged at his mustaches and grunted. "On account of me bein' soft-hearted, I reckon. I give this Hale gent a job when I got elected.

An' the first thing he done was try to frame me. Yesterday mornin', real early, he come to me an' said he'd got word the Winton Bank was goin' to be broke into. I went down with him, o' course. Wouldn't say how he'd found out, so I walked kind o' careful. Well, they was two gents in the bank all right. We run at 'em, an' they dropped a saddle bag full of bank notes, which I picked up. Then damn' if Hale didn't turn around an' put a bullet in me. Hit me in the side, but it was about two inches short of doin' what he wanted it to do. 'Fore I went down I took a stray swing an' got him between the horns with my gun barrel. Well, the two gents what had been robbin' the safe seen things wasn't goin' so well, so they lit out, an' I took after 'em with the first horse I could find."

"Shot up like you were," put in the Deacon.

"Oh, I been shot up worse. Anyhow, there was a runnin' fight, an' a lucky shot of mine cut the saddle-bag off one o' their broncs. They didn't know I was hurt then, so they kept goin', but they found out right after an' come after me, figgerin' not to lose the money. They was kind of anxious to finish me off, too, on account of Hale who'd rigged the deal with 'em. I got as far as Latigo, with them right on my tail, an' then the Deacon here took a hand."

"An' Hale," added Starling, "came humin' into town right after you did, making out you was one of the bank robbers to protect himself. Took me in complete. Deacon here was the only man with brains enough to see through it."

"How'd *you* find out he was Grantham?" inquired Deacon Bottle carefully.

"The way you acted made me think somethin' was blamed funny in the first place. Then this mornin' you was gone an' Hale was gone. I hunted up a feller from Winton an' found out that both Grantham and Hale were supposed to be on the trail of the robbers. I got a description of Grantham an' then things began to fit together."

"Hale alive, is he?" asked Grantham.

"Yeh. He's got a slug through his hip and he's tied tight, but he'll live. Say, you got the money all right, didn't you?"

The little gunman looked at Deacon Bottle with something very much like a twinkle in his eyes. And Deacon Bottle, remembering that sheaf of ten dollar bills, the majority of which still reposed in the upper pocket of his black frock coat, looked at the sky with an innocence which would have deceived an archangel.

"Most of it," drawled Sheriff Bill Grantham of Winton. "We took a little out for expenses, but most of it's here."

Deacon Bottle

The lovable old Renegade of Latigo Town —carries on the work of the Lord in another tale of his career of six-guns and Psalms!

In The Coming Issue

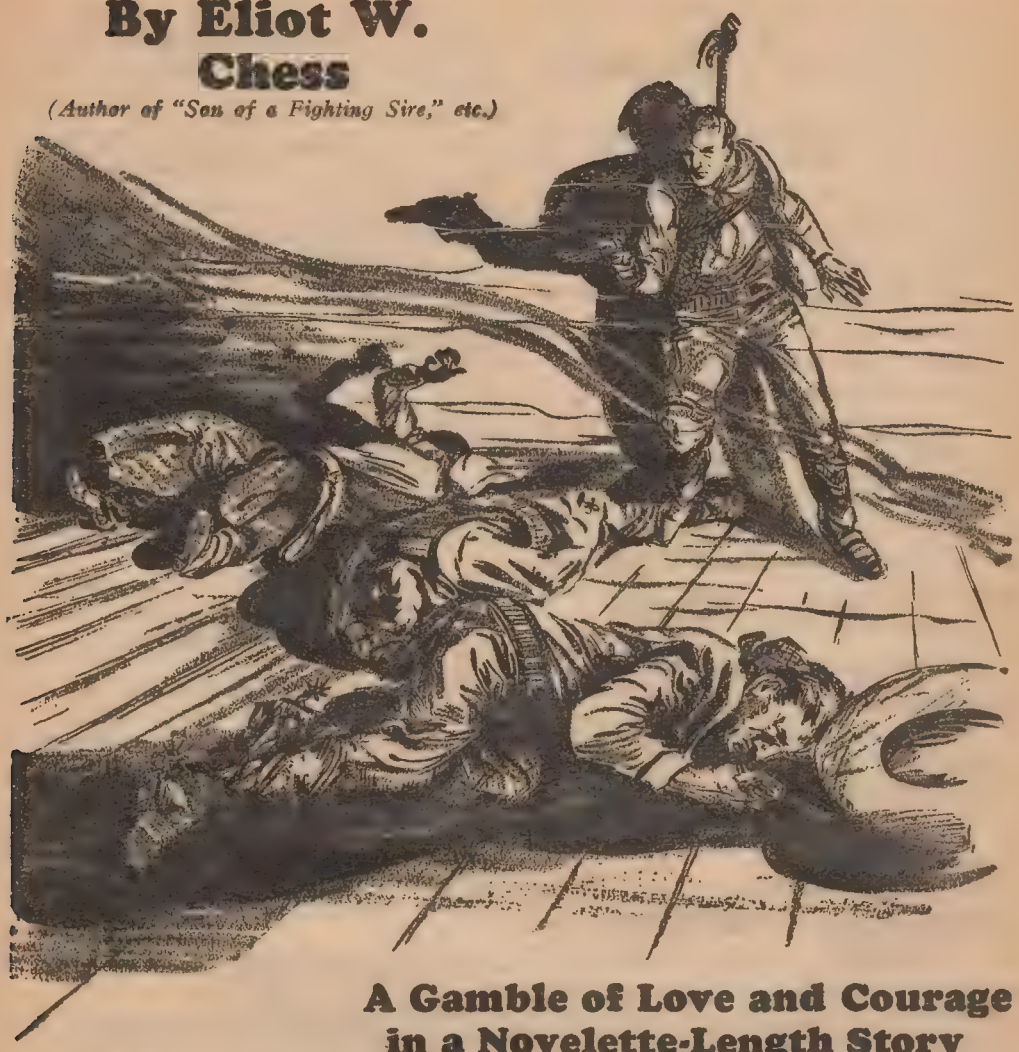
GAMBLERS

A poker-faced girl made the show-down a little harder when the time came for young Parson to swap lead with his father's killers. He wanted to live for her—yet all he could ask of fate was to check out as his father had before him—to die with his back to the wall—with his enemies facing the deadly flame of his guns . . .

DIE STANDING

By Eliot W. Chess

(Author of "Son of a Fighting Sire," etc.)



A Gamble of Love and Courage in a Novelette-Length Story

THE stranger had clear eyes and an easy smile, but his clothes looked like he'd worn them for a long time. That was enough to bring contempt into the eyes of Slim, a surly dude who wore a forty-dollar Stetson, big Mexican spurs and hand-made boots that came from "The Pass". He didn't even bother to answer when the stranger rode into the ranchyard and greeted him, and he wasn't any pleasanter than the law allows when he jerked a thumb in the foreman's direction in response to the stranger's question.

The foreman was all right. He looked at the dusty young rider and said: "Looks like you been travelin' some."

"Come from over the Panhandle," said the young man. "Name's Parson."

"Parson?" said the foreman thoughtfully. "Seems I've heard that name somewhere before."

"Maybe," said Parson.

"Well," said the foreman good-naturedly, "what'd you come down here for?"

"I come on business," Parson said.

"Business?" repeated the foreman. "What kind?"

Parson lost his easy smile. "I come here to kill a man."

The foreman laughed skeptically, but Parson said: "I mean it. Only I went broke, an' I need a new outfit before I go after my man. I thought maybe I could get a job here."

When the foreman asked Parson if he was a good cowman Parson said:

"No. I'm no good at all."

"Well, what *can* you do?"

"Well, I'm pretty fair at singing, and I'm first rate with a forty-five. Besides that I'm a gamblin' fool. I learned singing from a pockmarked Mex up in the Panhandle, my ol' man made me gun wise, and I took to gamblin' kinda natural like. I guess it's in my blood."

Slim walked up. "A gamblin' fool," he said contemptuously.

"Why, yes," said Parson. His glance dropped to the silver spurs. "They're right nice," he said.

"An' you'll play hell winnin' them," said Slim.

THE foreman never did know why he hired Parson, who said he was a gambling fool. It may have been because he said he'd come to that section to kill a man. Anyway, Parson was hired. It only took a day for Slim and the boys to realize Parson didn't care much about cows, but somehow that didn't seem to matter much. That very first night he borrowed a guitar from the cook. He sat down at the side of the long doby bunkhouse, there where the saddles hung from iron spikes in the wall. A fresh breeze came over the mesquite, just after the sun had gone down. Parson sat there and leaned back. In a low, clear voice he sang songs of the West. The song that got under their skins was the one that started:

He was a gamblin' man from th' Rio Gran',
An' it was win or lose or draw—

The song went on to tell about the trouble the gambling man had with a bad man by the name of Slate, who lived on the bad side of the Rio. After the gambling man built up a fortune, Slate and his men came over to smoke the gambling man out. Now, the gambling man was pretty handy with a forty-five, but he was only one against six. When he heard Slate's men riding up, he tied himself to an iron spike in the wall. He could shoot to the last then. He couldn't fall. He'd lay down his last hand, this gambling man, but he'd make the stakes plenty high.

An' when the Lawmen come, the deed was done,
An' th' poor gambler was stiff an' cold.
He still was tied an' there he died
This gun-shootin' gambler bold.

He'd shot his last an' he shot 'em fast,
As they'd come through the open door,
To kill the gambler, th' card-sharpin' rambler,
Who left three dead on th' floor. . ."

An' so ended that man on th' Rio Gran'
Who could win or lose or draw;
That card-sharpin' rambler, an' death dealin' gambler,
Who was found dead as hell by the Law.

The boys had listened silently until the end of Parson's mournful song. The brief quiet that followed was interrupted by the foreman.

"Seems to me I heard something like that. Seems to me it happened a couple of years back, over where Packard's place is down on the Rio."

"It did," Parson said.

When the foreman asked where Parson had heard the song, Parson said:

"Oh, I just kinda made it up. See, that there gamblin' man was my dad."

Parson had been at the Lazy-U place just a week when Slim brought him the

letter. It was high noon, and the boys were hanging around the corral when Slim came up to him and said:

"Here, gamblin' man. This here must be th' answer to that there letter you wrote when you first came. Looks to me like it come from a lady."

Parson tore open the end, and scanned the open page.

> Yes, Parson was killed in this place one night, and the posse from Maverick found him the next morning tied to a spike in the doby wall. There were three holes in him, and he was dead. That fellow name of Slate still hangs around and I think he had something to do with it. What you said about Parson wearing a diamond ring makes me sure he must have, because Slate wears a big diamond ring on his little finger, now. There is also a story about Parson hiding his fortune in this house, somewhere, only you can't tell anything about stories like that. Anyway, I wouldn't come around, because Slate is still here. He has his boys, and he has an outfit across the Rio.

The letter was signed, "Frisco", yet it was the delicate writing of a woman.

WHEN Parson finished reading it he walked out where the foreman was talking to Slim at the side of the corral.

"You ever heard of a man name of Slate?" he asked.

"Why, yes," said the foreman.

"Who is he?'

"Best I know he's got a place on the other side of the Rio. He's got some boys and he's bad."

"Ever hear of Packard's?"

"I tol' you before it was that gamblin' place down on the Rio. Why?"

"Because I'm going to Packard's today. And tomorrow I'm going to kill Slate if he's the man I think he is. I wonder if I can't do something about getting a better horse. See—I may need a good horse."

"But you only been here a week," said the big man.

"I guess that means I can't get a good horse."

"That's about it," the foreman said.

Parson turned away sadly. He walked on into the corral, singled out his little horse and started back. The boys were leaning over the fence when he came out shaking his saddle blanket.

Slim strutted up to him: "Where you going gamblin' man?"

"I'm hightailin' it," said Parson.

"On that horse? That's a hell of a horse for a man to be seen ridin'."

Parson said easily: "It's the only horse I got."

"An' you a gamblin' man," Slim said derisively. "A hell of an outfit for a gamblin' man to have. I guess maybe you been boastin'.

Parson wheeled angrily.

"When I said I was a gamblin' man I meant it. Only one thing I never said before: I never gambled for money in my life. My old man gambled until he got three holes in him and a place in Boot Hill. To my way of thinking that's what happens to most gamblers. Only listen, you: I need a new horse, an' I need one bad. I got a fine gun, and a third string horse." He dug down in his pocket for a deck of cards, and placed it on the top of a barrel. "One cut, Slim. My gun and horse against your mare."

Slim looked around at the staring faces, and then back at Parson.

"That gun you got any good?" he asked.

"Best money can buy."

Slim paused. "One cut," he said finally.

Parson shuffled the cards. "Draw," he said.

Slim moved forward a nervous hand, and drew a seven. Parson easily flipped over an eight. The boy laughed and Slim lost his temper.

"Once more," he insisted.

"What you betting?" asked Parson.

"I got a forty dollar Stetson, and thir-

ty-eight dollars in my pocket. I'll bet it against my horse. One cut."

It was the fastest bit of shuffling they'd ever seen in that part of the Rio District. Once Slim got frantic, he bet everything he had. A half an hour had not passed before Parson rode away with a forty Stetson on his head, and a holster with Mex silver trimmings. He had on a pair of fine hand-sewn boots, and silver spurs. His horse was the best on the Lazy-U corral, and there was a silver bit on its bridle.

Slim leaned against the whitewashed corral watching everything he had prized in this world move out beyond the mesquite. And long after it disappeared he heard the distant yet clear voice of the gamblin' man's song:

> Oh, he was a gambling man from the Rio Gran'
> An' it was win or lose or draw. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

A Tin-Horn Retires

PACKARD'S Gambling Place was known east as far as the Pecos, and up North in the slaughterhouses of Kansas City. It was a two-story doby set next to the river. A single dirt road passed in front of it, and led on west as far as the cowtown of Maverick. In the old days of the stagecoaches it was a stopping place, where a man might get a meal and a night's rest if he wanted it. When the Indians got too bad, the place became deserted and stayed that way for years. The next thing anyone knew about it a tin-horn gambler named Parson moved into the place with three green-top tables, two wagon-loads of booze, and an evil eye. The story soon got around to the outfits along the Rio that there was a dance in Parson's place every night, and whiskey was four bits a shot. The story also went around that Parson, the tin-horn gambler, was making a fortune. And he was.

How he ever got at outs with Slate, the bad man, no one knew. People said it started over a crooked card game, and some say it was over a little blond girl with wandering blue eyes and an unsatisfied smile. The truth of it was Slate knew Parson was making money, and he wanted it. Whether it was Slate who killed the little gambler or not, no one really knew. Anyway, someone passing Parson's place one night heard shots and a scream. At least, that was what he reported to the sheriff of Maverick. Later in the day the sheriff rode down to the place, and found Parson tied to an iron spike into the wall. It was obvious that he'd tied himself there, knowing that if he kept on his feet he could keep firing until the end, and that's just what he'd done, because when the sheriff found him he was dead. At his feet was an empty forty-five, while in front of him three dead men lay sprawled out on the floor.

While the sheriff was going through Parson's clothing, he found a picture of a young man. In the center was a bloody hole, made by the bullet that had caused Parson's death. On the back of the picture was a note:

> I just had this picture taken. I thought maybe you'd like to see it. Seems to me you'd better give up gambling and come over here to the B-Bar-B place in the Panhandle, and stop gambling because it'll get you, sometime.

The sheriff shoved the bloody picture into his pocket, and after he and his posse got back to Maverick he wrote to the B-Bar-B place over in the Panhandle, giving all the known details of the shooting, and sending the picture. . . .

For about a year after that, the place on the Rio was closed; and then, one

day, Packard came. He said he'd come down from "Frisco", and along with him came the prettiest girl anybody had ever seen. She had dark hair and eyes that flared. There was an easy motion about her when she walked. She took nothing from anybody and asked the same in return.

The first night Packard opened his gambling hall, he said: "This place is going to be straight from the beginning. I'll get my house percentage, and no more. I'm here for a year and then I've promised Frisco I'll close house. See, gents, she doesn't like a gambling man much. She kinda hates a tin-horn gambler."

THINGS went well for the Packards, until Slate showed up one day from his place across the Rio. Along with him came his diamond ring and a few of his boys. He looked at Packard's layout, and he looked at Frisco. In his mind he said: "That there is the finest woman I ever seen, and what's more I'm getting her." But how he was going to do it he didn't know himself. He tried to be a gentleman, at first. When Frisco would have none of him, he grew sour and started making some plans. "Honest" Packard was making money, and plenty of it. Slate couldn't stand a thing like that. He started figuring about that, too, and when Slate started figuring something had to happen.

It got on close to the end of the year. Two days before the end a sign was hung up on the colorless walls of the place by Phil, the weepy-eyed little bartender Packard had brought down to the Rio country.

Phil walked around looking for a place to hang the sign until he came to the spike Parson had used that fatal night, when the three men had died at his feet. The rope he had used was still hanging over it. Once in a while, Packard used to say, "See that spike—that's where Parson hung himself up and got shot to pieces. That there is the rope he used." Well, when Phil saw the spike that day, it was strange he didn't notice the new crack there in the wall. But he didn't. All he saw through his bleary eyes was the spike, and that was the place to hang the announcement of the closing of Packard's.

Sunday night is the last night
Packard's is closing up.

It was going to be a big night. It was going to be the biggest night Packard's place had ever seen. What remained of the last shipment of booze was going at half price, and at the end of the night, Packard and Frisco were to pile their stuff on the buckboard and move on to parts unknown, along with Phil, the weepy-eyed barkeep.

That last Sunday night before the crowd came Packard called Frisco into one of the two rooms at the top of the stairs.

"Frisco," he said. There was a kind of sadness in his manner. "Frisco. . . . This is the end of Packard, the gambler. I've made enough money to keep us for the rest of our lives some place. I came here with ten thousand, and now, I've got almost that much more. Tonight, Frisco, I'm giving you five thousand for yourself."

When he handed her fifty hundred dollar bills, she protested. She took five of them for what she called "good luck," and returned the rest. She'd take it some other time.

"You happy we're going?" Packard asked her.

"Sure. I guess I've never been happier in my life. I hate gambling. Why can't people lead a decent life?"

"We'll lead a decent life after tonight," said Packard.

THE crowd started coming early. Before nightfall the log hitching rack in

front of the place was crowded. Most of the men who came felt it was a shame that an honest place like Packard's was closing its doors.

When Packard finally came out of his room at the top of the stairs the men could see he had misgivings about closing up. He was a fine man anyway. He was close on to fifty, with patient blue eyes, and a poker face that sometimes turned into a smile. He moved slowly down the stairs, passed the sign hung to the spike, and on up to the bar.

"I sure hate to see this place close up," he told Phil sadly.

Phil said: "Mister Packard, I hate to see the end of anything."

"But Frisco won't have it any other way," Packard said.

"Yeah, I know, Mister Packard. I know she won't have it any other way. Funny about her being the best gambling person I ever seen, and yet hatin' it th' way she does."

"It's in her blood, Phil. She got it from me."

A few more horses came up then, and their riders came in. When the last one sauntered up to the bar, he said:

"We seen Slate coming over the river with a couple of his boys."

Only Slate didn't come in with a couple. He came in with six. When he first stood in the doorway, there was a contemptuous smile on his dark face. His mean little eyes passed from one to the other of the men who stood at the bar.

Slate was a big man, and he had a habit of holding onto his gun belt with his right hand. He was standing that way when the one he called Blackie came in, and walked up to the bar. The rest of his boys came in soon after that. Only Slate didn't move. He stood just inside the door, and watched the men who were there. From the first there was something about his manner that was bad.

When Frisco finally came out of her own room at the top of the stairs, the first one she saw was Slate. Her eyes never left him as she walked down.

Facing him, she said: "What did you come for?"

"Why," said Slate. "It's your last night. I simply had to come your last night."

"Yes, I guess you did."

"An' them's my boys over there at the bar. We all kinda thought we'd make our donation to th' Packards before they skipped out."

Frisco had her first sense of fear when she looked at Blackie and the rest of Slate's boys. They were all slinging guns, and they looked a little ill at ease, as if they knew sometime that night something might happen.

"Please don't do anything bad," Frisco told Slade pleadingly.

The diamond ring flashed on Slate's little finger as he rubbed the side of his face with his hand. He started to smile as he said: "You been hearing that there story about me an' that fellow name of Parson. Maybe my men done it, an' what's that got to do with me?"

"Plenty," Frisco threw at him suddenly.

She turned, and walked back up the steps. Once she looked back before she opened the door to her own room. She didn't close it. She slammed it. The sound of it caused a sudden silence to come. No one spoke, and in that prolonged quiet came the clear voice of a man outside:

Oh, he was a gamblin' man from the Rio Gran'
An' it was win or lose or—draw.

CHAPTER THREE

Drinks on the House

WHEN those who stood at the bar heard the jingle of silver spurs, they turned slowly toward the door. Parson

came in with all of the trappings of a successful tin-horn gambler: a forty-dollar hat, hand-sewn boots and a holster weighted down with silver trimmings. Everybody watched him as he walked slowly up to the bar, and spoke to Phil.

"Somebody here by the name of Frisco?"

"Sure, Frisco's Packard's daughter. She's up in that there first room at the top of the steps. You go on up. She's there."

Parson turned away, and moved slowly up the steps. When he got to the door he knocked.

Inside Frisco's voice said: "Come in."

There was a bed inside, a couple of chairs, and a dresser. Frisco was sitting over by the window, looking into the darkness beyond. Her head turned slowly as Parson closed the door.

"You Frisco?" he asked.

"Why, yes."

"Well," Parson said. "I'm the fellow what wrote that there letter to you."

Frisco said: "So you're Parson." Her eyes moved over the trappings, the silver, and the forty-dollar Stetson he held in his hand. He was just another successful gambler to her. He was the same as his old man, the one who was killed. Only Frisco felt strange, looking at him the way she was. Her eyes dropped for the first time they'd ever dropped when looking at a man. When she tried to put on her poker face, it wouldn't come. She tried to cover up by saying:

"Sit down, gambling man."

But Parson didn't sit down. He looked at her through cool eyes and she liked his easy smile.

"See—" he said. His voice sounded nice to her. She couldn't help that. "My old man came down here, an' I went to the Panhandle. The letter from the sheriff didn't get to me for a long time. See, I moved around a little up there."

"Gambling men have got to move around," Frisco said with a curl to her well-formed lips.

Parson hardly paused. "Well, the sheriff said he heard my old man hid some money here."

"That's the story," Frisco said.

"And about that diamond ring. See, it was my mother's."

"Slate wears a diamond."

"A big one?"

"It's the biggest I ever saw."

Parson said, "I got a gambler's hunch that Slate's the man, Frisco."

She didn't know why she got up. But she did and she walked slowly up to him. He could have touched her when she stopped.

"I suppose you're just another of these tin-horn gamblers. I can tell that by your trappings. Just like a Christmas tree. Well, one thing, gambling man, Slate's downstairs. He's got his pack with him. I wouldn't start anything if I was you. It's our last night in this place anyway. Tomorrow we're leaving."

"Don't you like gambling men?" he asked.

"I hate them," she said without hesitation. "My father is the only decent one I ever met."

THEY still stood facing each other, Frisco and Parson with all of the trappings of a tin horn gambler. His gaze wandered over the room, and back to Frisco. He glanced back at the door and again at the girl who faced him.

"I came here to find out how my old man was killed, and I'm finding out," he said. His lower lip trembled a little as his right hand moved slowly toward his gun. He jerked it with the quickness of a man who was accustomed to the movement. When he turned away Frisco's hand fell upon his arm.

"What are you going to do?" she gasped.

"Just finding a couple of things out, that's all."

"Why they'd kill you. Slate's got six of his men here!" She didn't know why she'd said it. It came out and that was all.

"I'm taking a gambler's chance," he said.

"Fool!" she threw at him.

"It's a gambler's chance."

She tried to laugh at him only the laugh wouldn't come. Instead she said: "Please, gambling man, don't!" Her eyes were soft and pleading as she looked at him, the flash had gone. All of her hardness dropped away, and all she could do was face him and look through large gray eyes and say, "Please don't . . . it's our last night. I don't want to have anything happen. I'd—I'd hate to see you dead."

"You mean that?" he said.

She wondered why she said: "Yes . . . Yes I mean it."

That did something to Parson. He put his gun back in his holster. There was relief in Frisco's eyes as she lowered herself to a chair. He could see how lonely she was then. He could even feel his own loneliness. They didn't speak. There didn't seem anything to say. Only, being alone in the room the way they were, something was happening. There were just two people, two children of gambling men. And each of them had the taint of it in their blood. They were of the kind who took chances at a moment's notice, the kind that would put everything they had on the cut of a card. That's what they were doing now. In a moment's notice they were putting everything they had on a cut of a card.

They might have known it from the first, only they didn't. All they did was keep quiet. Each of them tried to put on a poker face, but it wouldn't come. So they didn't dare to look at each other much.

After a while Parson turned toward the door. As he grasped the knob, he turned. Frisco was gazing at him.

"Don't worry about me, Frisco," he said.

The faintest of smiles played over her lips. He walked out, closing the door, and moved down the steps.

Slate stood next to Blackie, his hand gripping a glass. From one finger, a diamond ring shone through the haze of smoke. Slate turned as Parson came up.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Just a gamblin' man," said Parson.

"Seems to me I seen a face like yours before—" said Slate—"someplace."

"Nice ring, you got," Parson said.

Slate's eyes narrowed, and his fingers fumbled the glass he held. "Yes, I've seen a face something like yours before."

Just then Packard said in a loud voice from his place back of one of the green-topped tables: "Silence, gents! . . . This here is my last night. Tomorrow Frisco an' me go to parts unknown. We're leaving, boys, an' you don't know the feeling I got saying goodbye to you fellows. From th' first I've had a straight-shooting place. It'll be that way tonight. Only one change. Th' sky is the limit. Because Packard and his girl Frisco is leaving tomorrow. Have a drink on the house, gentlemen! . . . Phil set 'em up. . . . Th' tables are open for play!"

EVERYBODY had had drinks when Frisco came down. She had on a green dress, and there was an easy swing to her chin as she came, taking each step with well-defined ease. Her chin was up and her eyes flashed. Parson watched her as she came on slowly.

"Hello, gambling man," she said with a smile.

Slate leaned close to Parson, "Listen, gambling man. How about a game, just you an' me."

Parson looked at Slate: "One card," he said. "High man, and ten dollars a cut."

"Twenty," said Slate, with a sneer.

The men crowded around while Parson shuffled his cards. Frisco looked on, a little uneasy. She could feel the sudden hate between the two.

"Draw for me, Frisco," Slate said.

When Frisco drew the king she felt hurt inside. The crowd laughed at the gambling man. His hand reached out. His hand fumbled over the deck. When he turned the card it was an ace.

The crowd grew still. Three times after that they drew for a high card, and each time Parson, the gambling man, won.

"Once more for a thousand dollars!" Slate snarled.

"No," Parson said quietly .

Slate had a smirk on his face when he said:

"Just a one-horse gambler." He turned away then, and walked slowly over and sat down at Packard's table.

When the crowd moved after him, Parson found himself looking into Frisco's staring eyes. A bitter smile played over her face when she asked for the cards. She placed them on the bar, and studied them.

"Marked," she said, quietly. Then after a pause: "When we were upstairs I had a feeling for a moment that you might be different. But you aren't. You're just—just a cheap gambler like I thought. A cheap gambler."

"He—he had the ring," Parson said, in a whisper. "I know he killed my old man. Anyway, I didn't promise you I wouldn't cheat. All I promised you was that I wouldn't start anything."

"I might have known by your clothes," Frisco said contemptuously.

They fell into a silence neither of them seemed able to control. Their eyes met, and wandered away. They stood alone, the two of them. All the world seemed far away. . . .

"Let's walk outside," said Frisco quietly.

A LIGHT breeze had sprung up, coming through the mesquite. The smell of greasewood was in the air. Horses stood, head bent, at the hitching rack. They left the murmuring voices of Packard's place and the light of the windows behind them as they walked along the road. It became quieter and quieter still. And as they walked, the silence was interrupted only by the jingling of Parson's Mexican spurs.

"I suppose," Frisco said after they'd walked for a while, "I suppose we all have things we want to do. You've come to have a showdown. It's your way. It's the gambling way—always thinking about a showdown. I'm tired of showdowns. I want some place far away—" It was Frisco's voice, low and disheartened sounding —"someplace where it's quiet. All my life I've waited for it. We've got enough money, now. We'll have everything we want. Think of it—everything we want."

Parson was hardly listening. He was thinking about the sparkling stone on Slate's hand. He was wondering why he had promised Frisco he'd do nothing about it now.

"Slate had on the ring," he said.

She didn't answer. They walked on.

"So you've got everything?" he asked.

"Everything," she said. "We've got money and we can do what we want to do."

The moon shone in their faces when they turned back. Shadows stretched out from the mesquite.

"Slate said he'd seen my face someplace before," Parson told her.

"You can't get your mind off Slate, can you?"

"That ring was my mother's ring," Par-

son said simply. "An' I can't get that picture of my old man tying himself up out of my mind. Just tying himself up to a spike in the wall. You seen the rope there hanging from th' spike. That was th' same rope."

"He was just a gambler laying down his last hand," Frisco said and then she added, "Come on, we got to go back."

They'd just walked inside Packard's place when they knew something was wrong. The smoke could have been cut with a knife, and the crowd was jammed in deep around a single green topped table. Phil was back of the bar, and no one was drinking. He stopped pouring a drink for himself, and leaned over toward Frisco and said seriously:

"They been cutting each other's throats. It's th' worse game I ever seen. Kelly—you know Kelly?—he just lost everything he had. Hansen what owned the M-M outfit—well, he don't no more. Slate's got th' luck with him, an' your dad is goin' hog wild. I never seen him like this, Frisco."

As he downed his drink, and took another, Frisco said:

"He's been gambling too long to lose his head, Phil."

"I kinda thought so. I kinda—"

His words were interrupted by the harsh voice of Slate.

"An' two thousan' on top of that!"

Then came Packard's voice, strained, almost hysterical. "Covered and two—more."

Silence came then.

The lamp smoked above the green-topped table. Frisco's face had gone white, a single hand clutching the bar. She had a feeling even then that her happiness was on top of that green table. Parson stood behind her, but he could do nothing. The tension didn't break until Packard pushed through the crowd. He stood like a beaten man, his hands down, his gray hair over his eyes.

"Finished," he whispered hoarsely. He stared at Frisco, as though he were staring at a ghost.

"It's all gone," he said helplessly. "The last night and it's all gone. We're finished, Frisco. There won't be any place to settle down, now. We're finished and we're done for. I even lost the money I was going to give to you. When Frisco tried to reassure him, he turned away from her and walked toward the stairs, dragging his feet like those of a drunken man. He took step after step up the stairway, until he got to the door of his own room.

When the door closed upon Packard, Frisco's eyes moved to the men who stood around the green-topped table. They'd drawn away, leaving Slate still seated. His head was thrown back, and upon his face was a look of triumph.

Frisco moved slowly toward him.

"So you think you're a good gambler," she said coldly.

"I jus' finished up everybody," Slate said.

"You haven't finished me, Slate," she said. Her words were brittle, cold.

Phil downed his drink, and leaned over toward Parson. "She's a gamblin' fool," he whispered. "Learned it from her ol' man."

"So am I," Parson said. "And' I learned it from my old man." His spurs jingled over the floor, until they stopped and Parson said: "I'm sitting in on this game."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gamblin' Girl

PEOPLE had seen a lot of poker in those parts and they'd just watched what they thought was the wildest card game they'd ever see in their lives. But they had another thought coming, al-

though the game they looked on now was different. It was cool and calculated, played by three people—two men and a girl—while an awed crowd stood about in a circle, under the yellow rays of a smoking lamp.

At first the stakes were low. Frisco had only five hundred to lose, and Parson had less, but there was blood in every bet. Once, as they played, Parson leaned back and in a low voice he sang:

Oh, he was a gamblin' man from th' Rio Gran'
An' it was lose or win—or—draw . . . .

Slate's movements were slow, and his face took on a yellowish hue under the light, while the diamond flashed from the little finger of his right hand. Across from him sat Frisco, tense, her eyes flashing. In between was Parson with an easy smile on his face. Once he looked over at Slate and said:

"So you think you've seen me someplace before?"

Slate's head jerked up. His eyes thinned away, but he said nothing. Parson dealt the cards with a speed that was faster than the eye. . . .

About that time Phil left the bar, and walked around in back of Parson. Phil, too, had seen gambling men before. He'd seen plenty of them. Through bleary eyes he watched. He saw the Packard luck suddenly change. He saw Frisco's pile of chips grow and grow, while Parson's stood still.

"She's a gamblin' fool," he whispered.

And Phil was right. From the first, luck was with her. She never seemed to draw the wrong cards. Her pile of blue chips built up and up.

"Just a natural born gamblin' fool. Got it from her dad, I guess." Phil said proudly.

Just then Frisco looked over the table at Slate: "The sky's the limit, now. I got enough."

Parson said easily: "I haven't got enough chips."

"Then drop out!" cried Slate.

Parson shook his head. "It's my deal, Slate," he said, "and I'm not getting out until you've got to my limit."

The stakes went to the sky that hand. When Parson dropped out he'd lost all he had, but he didn't seem to care. The bets went in thousands then. One thousand . . . two . . . Sweat crawled over Slate's face. His hand started shaking. When the showdown came, Slate threw in his cards, he yelled:

"Four Kings! You can't beat 'em!"

Frisco's eyes moved up coolly.

"Not enough," she said, as she threw down the cards, one after one. "Four aces, Slate. Count 'em."

She jumped triumphantly to her feet.

"Gambler!" She threw at Slate. "You think you are a gambler but it takes someone like me—Frisco—to show you what gambling is. And I mean all of you! I don't like your tribe, and I never did. It's the end of this place, and I'm sick of it. I'll be glad to leave all of you behind. And after I've gone, remember that it took somebody who hated gambling to show you how it's done. Yes—and just remember the best gambler you ever saw was Frisco, who's got everything she wants and is going away."

Slate's face flushed. He'd lost everything, now. The awed crowd stood still. It was the moment of Frisco's greatest triumph. Her gaze lowered. Parson was looking up at her, that easy smile on his face.

"You've won everything back—" he said quietly—"everything, Frisco."

Her gaze dropped to the scattered deck of cards upon the table. It wasn't the same deck they'd started with. It was Parson's deck, and Parson's deck was marked!

THAT was the reason Frisco had won that night. Her eyes closed, as she fingered the cards. Her lower lip trembled, and a hurt look came over her face. Parson had used his marked cards to deal her winning hands whenever he could. That had been advantage enough—to let her win.

As she stood there, she heard the shot. The blast of a forty-five sounded dull in the confines of Packard's room at the top of the steps.

"What was that?" she asked.

When no one answered, her head dropped. The thin fingers of her right hand gripped the edge of the green topped table under the light. Yet she couldn't move, nor did anyone else seem to have the power. When Frisco took her first step, she wavered. At last she caught the narrow bannister of the stairway. She took the first two steps at an even stride, and then ran up the rest, leaving behind her a lingering gasp of hopelessness.

Everything she had won was left behind piled high on the green topped table.

Someone said:

"Packard musta shot hisself."

Parson jumped to his feet. "Shot himself?"

"Shot himself on account of losing—"

Parson ran to the steps, and up, taking three at a time. He ran in through the door. Inside Packard lay across the bed with a hole in his side.

Frisco was leaning over him, crying: "Why did you do it? . . . Why?" When she heard Parson she looked up and said: "Tell them to leave. Tell them to go away. My father just shot himself."

Parson ran out of the room. He stood at the top of the stairs. "Packard just shot himself," he told them. "Frisco wants you all to leave. She asked me to tell you. Phil, bring some water."

The crowd below moved toward the door. Perplexed, they did as they were told. Presently horses moved away from the hitching rack, and went off through the brush.

Phil ran up the steps, the water in the bucket splashed as he came. He was frightened and shaking. After he went in to Packard's room, Parson followed, and tore open Packard's shirt. It was an ugly hole, near the heart. With deft movements he washed the wound.

"He's got to get to a doctor. Maverick isn't far. You've got to get him there, Frisco."

"We got a buckboard," Phil said excitedly.

"Go out and harness the horses to it," Parson told him. He was calm, then.

After Phil was gone, Frisco leaned over her father: "I won it all back," she told him in a low voice. "All of it! With that five hundred you gave me—you hear me? I won it all back. It's all right, everything's all right."

Packard's eyes opend. "All right?" He didn't understand.

"Yes! I won it all back. Frisco won it all back." Frisco was hysterical.

Parson heard more horses move away from the hitching rack outside. He ran out, and looked over the bannister. Below, a few men had not moved. With relief he saw the money was still on the green-topped table. He hurried down, but at the bottom of the steps he felt the blunt end of a gun in his back.

"Put 'em up—gamblin' man!" It was Slate's voice.

Parson's hands raised.

Slate said: "Blackie, get the money there. There's a sack on th' floor down at the end of the bar. An' don't move, gamblin' man, or I'll put a hole through you."

Blackie ran to the end of the bar. He picked up the gunny sack, and ran to the table. With a single hand, he raked in the greenbacks.

Only Slate's men were left. Their guns were drawn. They stood silently watching. The lamp smoked, and sputtered.

"I'm done," said Blackie.

Slate jerked out Parson's gun, then. He turned and backed toward the door. His men followed. Blackie was the last. In his hand he held the bag. They moved out through the door. When the last had gone, Parson turned, and ran up the stairs. Frisco wheeled as he came in.

"Where's a gun!" he demanded.

She pointed to Packard's gun, which hung over a corner of the bed. Parson's hand clutched it. He again ran down the stairs. Slate's men had driven on, beyond the mesquite. Parson could hear their retreating movements beyond the brush.

STANDING at the side of the hitching rack, Parson lifted his forty-five, measured the sound beyond the mesquite and fired. He felt he shouldn't have done it then. Slate might come back. Packard had to be gotten to a doctor. Nothing must hold that up.

Phil wheeled around the house then, driving the buckboard, and pulled up.

"Who shot?" he cried out.

"Slate took the money Frisco won. He's gone. Go on. Get Packard. Get him to a doctor and get him there fast!"

Phil ran on, and Parson stood there waiting, with a hand on the hitching rack. The sound of Slate's men was far in the distance, now. He turned away, and then stopped short. He heard the distinct sound of a moan from out there in the darkness. He listened. The moan was louder—the sound that comes from a suffering man.

Cautiously Parson walked through the mesquite. He moved quietly, hesitating every few steps. When he saw the horse he stopped. Not until then did Parson know his measured shot into darkness had had its effect.

He leaned over the man, and said: "Who are you?"

"Blackie," the man gasped. "Only for God's sake don't shoot me again. I'm almost done for, now."

Parson picked up the dying man with a single jerk. He carried him back through the mesquite, passing the hitching rack and the waiting buckboard, and in through the door. Blackie continued to moan, even after he was lowered to the green-topped table.

Just then Phil ran out to the landing at the top of the steps. He looked down crazily and gasped out: "What happened?"

"That shot I fired hit Blackie," said Parson.

Phil turned and ran back through the door where Frisco was still binding up Packard's wound. Parson heard the door slam and saw Blackie's tortured mouth move.

"I'm done for!"

Parson got a bottle of whiskey and forced a drink down Blackie's throat, but it was no use. The doomed man brightened a moment, and said:

"The money's out there still. Right out there by the mesquite where I was. You better—you better get it because when Slate sees I ain't comin', he'll come back."

Blackie was weakening.

"Listen, Blackie—" Parson said—"we better take you on to the Doctor. We're taking Packard."

"It's no use," Blackie whispered. "I'm done for. An' I guess it's comin' to me." His eyes opened wide and a fearful stare came into them. "I know where I seen you before. No—it wasn't you. Somebody like—"

He paused, took a breath and went on: "Parson! He was standin' over there," Blackie cried as the lean finger of his

right hand pointed toward the wall where the spike was. "Parson tied hisself right there. I never forgot his eyes!"

"Did—did Slate kill him, Blackie?"

"We all done it. Parson had money here somewheres, only Slate never got nothing . . . Listen? You hear horses?"

"No."

"Is them horses of Slate's coming back?"

"What about the money?"

"Somewheres here, Slate says. We all shot Parson full a holes, an' then he couldn't tell nothing about where th' money was. All Slate got was the diamond ring."

Parson heard a movement on the stairways. Frisco was helping Packard down, taking each step slowly, carefully. Packard looked white, his head was down, each step looked like it would be the last one. He said nothing. As he stepped to the floor, Phil took hold of his other arm, and the three struggled out through the door.

Just then a moan came from Blackie. He raised himself up, said: "Them's horses I hear!" He pressed his hands against his middle, leaned over and fell to the floor.

CHAPTER FIVE

Last Hand

PARSON was bending over Blackie when Frisco came in, and stopped.

"Phil told me what happened," she said.

It was a feverish silence.

"He's dead," Parson said. He jumped to his feet. "You wait. . . Frisco—wait."

He ran out through the door, out past the buckboard, and on down the road where he'd found Blackie. As he picked up the sack, he thought he heard the distant sound of horses. He ran back, pausing long enough at the buckboard to hand the sack to Phil.

"Here. And get out of here and get out fast!"

"Frisco ain't come. She's inside. . . . Frisco!" Phil cried.

When Parson went in Frisco was still standing where he had left her. If ever a gambler had a poker face, Frisco had one, now.

"What you waiting for?" Parson asked her. "The money is out there with Phil. Go on!"

She stood still. She didn't move. Her hands clutched at her side.

"You better come with us," she said.

"No."

"Slate'll come back and then what?"

"Slate is coming now."

Outside Phil called "Frisco! . . . Frisco!"

Still she didn't move. "You better go with us!" She was pleading now, but she hadn't lost her poker face. "You—you better go!"

"No, Frisco, I've got something to do."

She looked at him hopelesly. The sound of moving hoofs in the distance caused her glance to sweep to the window.

"Listen!" he cried in a hushed voice.

"Yes—that's Slate."

"Slate and his men—you wouldn't have a chance."

"It's a gambler's chance, and I'm taking it," Parson cried.

"A tin-horn gambler to the last!" she said bitterly.

Phil's feverish voice called again: "Frisco!"

"Yes, to the last," Parson said.

Frisco leaned over the green topped table where the deck of cards still lay: "One cut . . . . If I get high you go."

"I'll take that."

They drew, facing each other. When Parson flipped over his card he held an ace. Frisco said:

"You'd cheat to the last. Just a cheating

gambler to the end." And then suddenly she lost her poker face and was just a hysterical girl: "You're going to lay down your last hand, gambling man. It's in your blood and it's in mine. That's the reason we seemed to know each other from the first. But, it'll cheat you in the last showdown!" There was another frantic cry from Phil, and the sound of Slate's horses not far away.

"For God's sake go!" Parson pleaded.

"All right, you tin-horn gambler! Go on and lay down your last hand!"

A sob caught in Frisco's throat. She tried to stifle it with a hand crushed to her mouth as she turned and ran out. The buckboard wheeled. A whip struck and then there floated to Parson's ears:

"Goodby. . . . Goodby, gambling man!"

PARSON could plainly hear Slate's horses, now. He stood in the center of Packard's gambling place, his gaze wandering, until it fell upon the spike in the wall. The rope was still there, the same rope which had held his father up until the last shot. . . .

He hurriedly put all of the lights out, but the one over the green-topped table. The horses were brushing through the mesquite as he tied himself to the spike in the wall. He, too, could lay down his last hand. Lay down his hand as his tin-horn gambling father had done it.

He raised his gun and fired. The shot threw over the last lighted lamp. Its flame jerked like a dying man, and went out. And as he stood there, tied so that he might not fall, listening to the movement of men outside, he sang in a soft voice:

He shot his last, and he shot 'em fast,
As they come in through th' open door
To kill the gambler, th' card sharpin' rambler,
Who left three dead on th' floor . . .

Slate's voice called: "Who's in there?"

Parson called back: "It's Parson. It's the gamblin' man. Come an' get me, Slate!" But through his mind the words of Frisco still lingered: "Just another tin-horn gambler who is throwing down his last hand!"

"Come out, gamblin' man."

"Come an' get me!"

The door was thrown open, but no one came in. Slate's voice shouted: "Where are you, gamblin' man!"

"Listen, Slate," Parson's voice in the darkness was the voice of a gambler throwing down his last hand. "You shot Parson full of holes, Slate. I'm Parson's son, and I'm waiting for you. I'll lay down my last hand, all right, but I'll make the pot plenty big."

"Come out!" cried Slate.

A shadow crept in through the open door.

A streak of red flashed in the darkness. Another. The shadow fell. Someone cried outside. A horse broke away from the hitching rack, and beat his way like mad through the brush.

A man shouted: "He's inside."

The night was mad. The horses trembled and jerked at the hitching rack. Nervous figures of men closed on the square house. A gunbarrel raised and dropped. The glass of a window shattered. The man's head raised. Bewildered by the inside darkness he fired and dropped down.

Inside, his back against the wall, the loop of a rope under his arms, stood Parson. Slowly and with meticulous care he was filling the empty chambers of his gun. In a low murmuring voice he said in a sing-song way:

He was just a tin-horn gambler
An' he was laying down his hand . . .

There was no bitterness in it. Parson was laying down his hand all right, and he hadn't been using a crooked deck.

—win or lose, or draw!

"Get inside and get him!" A pause, then. Then Slate's menacing voice: "Wait!"

A flame flickered through the broken window. A bundle of burning grass arched the air and fell in the center of the floor. It burned, half-lighted the room, and Parson, who stood poker-faced against the wall.

"Now, get him!" shouted Slate's voice.

Parson waited, his gun clutched to a dampness in the flickering light of the room. The door facing him flung back with a crash. Men rushed in, firing as they came. Strips of fire sprang out, slugs of forty-fives buried themselves deep in the doby wall. A man fell in the doorway, and another stumbled across him with a whimpering kind of groan.

"Ah!" It was Parson's voice. It was low, coming from his mouth that raised blood. And he saw Slate. Slate stood in the doorway. Together their guns flared crimson red.

Slate fell to his knees. He raised his gun but the power wasn't in his gun fingers. He fell forward, and crawled on all fours, sinking as he went, until his face struck the floor.

The ghastly light burned out.

Parson's knees sagged. His head fell forward. He breathed in short quick stabs of the spent powder-filled air. With the last effort he had in him, he drew himself erect.

Whispering almost without sound his song went on:

> He shot his last, an' he shot 'em fast,
> As they—

Limpness came. The rope grew taut and more taut. The weak doby wall gave way, and Parson fell and stretched out, the dirt bricks crumbling over him. . . .

PARSON didn't know what had aroused him, nor how much time had passed. He could feel himself being bumped this way and that. He could hear the sound of hoofs upon the road. When his eyes opened he saw the fading night and the beginning of a rosy dawn.

"You're all right. . . . Oh, you've got to be all right." That was Frisco's voice. It seemed to be a long ways away, at first. And then he knew his head was in her lap, and they were in the back of the buckboard. He could feel the comforting pressure of Frisco's arms and he could hear the tragic note in her voice. "I had to come back. I had to gamble again. I've gambled all my life."

"Hello, Frisco," Parson said.

"Phil!" she cried. "He's all right. He's all right. His eyes are open!"

From the driver's seat came Phil's voice filled with pride. "Slate'd never get that man—never."

"Hello, Phil."

Phil went on. "I never seen anything like it in all my life. They was in a circle around you. . . . Never in my life. . . . They was five of 'em. Slate was on his face. Slate was deader 'n hell. So was the rest of 'em."

Frisco's arms were clasping him: "Get well," she was saying tearfully. "Oh, God, let him get well."

And then somehow, Parson the tinhorn gambler, knew he wasn't laying down his hand. He'd just drawn an ace, and he was betting everything he had. "It's all right . . . all right." His voice drifted off, moaning a song punctuated by the beat of the horses feet.

> "I'm a gamblin' man. . . ."

And his song drifted through the mesquite, along the road that early morning.

"I simply couldn't leave you like that. I couldn't," Frisco said. "I simply couldn't. We're taking you to the Doctor. Dad isn't as bad as he looked. And listen. You listening, gambling man? That spike in the wall. The doby gave way. Back of

it was the money. That was the reason why. . . ."

"The wall gave way?" Parson asked.

"Yes—your weight. We found you lying on the floor—and the spike had given way. Maybe it was the bullets—maybe your weight. Anyway, the doby gave way. The money was back of it. That was the reason. . . ."

It was all simple then. Simple, hiding the money back of the wall like that. It was only natural to hide it there.

"And you've simply got to live. . . . You've simply got to. . . ."

Phil struck the horses. The buckboard jerked. Over and above it, came Phil's voice. "You couldn't kill him now. You can't kill a gambling man like him!"

And you couldn't. You couldn't kill a gambling man who had arms like Frisco's around him. He could feel that one of her hands was clenched. He held it. The fingers opened.

"It's the diamond ring," Frisco said. "Phil took it off Slate's little finger."

Parson looked at it, sparkling in the early morning. "You put it on, Frisco. It fitted my mother—it oughta fit you."

And that all happened on the road that led west from Packard's gambling place, while the sun came up, and the light wind came over the mesquite and fanned the face of the gambling man who'd laid down his last hand and won. . . .

THE END

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Gray Walls

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Pinto Williams rode with vengeance, with his old six-shooter cocked for the man who had framed him into jail—with his heart hardened against the girl he thought had failed him. He rode to war with hatred at his stirrup—for his home had been stolen from him while he lived within gray walls and, short of death, neither lead nor fire nor double-cross could stop him now.

THE hard-faced jury fled solemnly into the Crater County court room. The place was heavy with a deadly quietness. Would these men send Pinto Williams to the gallows?

Eyes centered on Pinto Williams. He was lean with youth; too young to kick out his life at the end of a rope. His eyes were blue and he was rugged about the head; his jaw was square with a will to fight. A red, horseshoe-shaped birth mark, low on one cheek, pulsed crimson. That was the only outward sign of the tension he felt.

Across the table sat Clarence Budd, the lawyer who had defended Pinto. Back East somewhere, Budd had been somebody before he had come to Comanche

Make Gunmen!

Dramatic Novel of Lawless Ranges

Springs seeking relief from asthma. Now Budd seemed more drawn, whiter, thinner than ever—as though the plea he had made had sapped the last of his strength.

"They've not acquitted you," remarked Budd huskily.

Pinto nodded, then turned to look into the little crowd of spectators. Verna Reeves, the girl he had always loved, sat beside Pinto's frail mother. They both smiled, bravely. Beyond them Pinto saw Yarberry, a neighbor. Pinto turned hastily to Budd.

"Yarberry hasn't given up the idea of a shootin' fracas—if I'm convicted," he whispered to the lawyer. "Get Verna to talk to him again."

Budd tiptoed. Everyone stared. Then Budd and dark-eyed Verna got Yarberry to go with them into the hall.

Pinto faced the jury again. If Yarberry persisted in his idea of gun trouble, it only would bring worse difficulties, and those neighbors in Lost Blue had more now then they could shoulder.

Those five neighboring families in Lost Blue had been friends back on the Republican. And it had been Pinto's father,

Morey Williams, who had lead them westward to Lost Blue Valley—and the trouble they'd found there. Their five wagons and stock had reached their destination at the end of a long and dusty day's drive. It had been sundown when first they looked into the basin of the Lost Blue River, on which their hopes were built.

Behind them were weary hour of quest. Westward stood the ragged Wolftongue Peaks. From those hills poured the Lost Blue. It meandered through flat meadows flanked north and south by grassy slopes, and then poured into a hole called The Sink, and was lost in some hidden channel under the lava. As they looked on these meadows, it seemed they had found their haven.

It was as they started to drive their stock down into the basin, that Flint Crawford had come riding with his men to turn them back. With ugly words and the threat of guns he had ordered them off the new range they'd just purchased. He'd told them that this was the water that Crawford's outfit had to have if they ran stock on their south range. When Morey Williams had tried to shove past the Cross Diamong gang, a scrimmage had started, and a Cross Diamond man had shot Williams down.

Morey Williams was buried on the rim above the eastern side of the valley on land belonging to Verna Reeves' father. Doggedly, and defiantly, the five families had moved onto their lands. When the first crops were green, Flint Cradwford struck again, driving his entire southern herd over the freshly cultivated fields. Cowman guns cut the way for that devastating herd. Pinto Williams grabbed his shotgun and plunged out of the ranch shack, and a Crawford warrior tried immediately for his life. Pinto shot, and the rider screamed to death, torn by buckshot. Flint Crawford came next, his gun licking at Pinto, but the second load of buck destroyed Flint's left eye, ripped away a hand, and left scars that had healed in a way that twisted Flint all out of plumb.

A Crater County jury had decided Morey Williams had been shot in self-defense; but Pinto Williams, shooting for his life, was bound over for murder. He knew, as he searched the hard faces of the men in the jury box, that he had been branded guilty!

AS Budd came back, the judge entered, people stood, and there was a rigamarole of legal talk. Pinto stood when ordered. He heard the words, as though from a distance.

"Murder, in the second degree."

"No; no; no!" His mother's voice pierced the moment, but a neighbor woman held her and quieted her while a gavel beat down the protest.

"The verdict," said the Judge, "automatically fixes the sentence; twenty-five years to life in the state's prison."

Talk surged, and the gavel again beat it down. In a breathless, maddening silence, the court adjourned.

"Let's let the crowd get out first," said the sheriff as he stopped Pinto after they had gone through the wicket in the rail.

"Pinto!" The convicted man turned as Verna spoke his name. He squandered a moment just feasting his eyes on her dark, red-cheeked lovliness. He wanted to remember her in those days ahead.

"Yarberry?' he asked after a moment.

"Promised not to start trouble unless they sentenced you to—hang." Her voice caught.

Yarberry pushed through the crowd then, and Pinto relaxed slightly as he saw that his neighbor carried no weapon.

"I'll get you pardoned," declared Clarence Budd as he elbowed to Pinto's side.

Flint Crawford came and shoved Budd aside. "You'll not build fence an' plant crops in Lost Blue now," Flint said. He

was a malignant figure, all scarred and twisted. "Nobody'll build fence an' shut off my cows from that water."

"Listen, mister," burst out Yarberry hotly, "you'll never own Lost Blue. Yore guns may force a way so you kin water stock there, but we'll never sell an' you'll be in trespass. Some day, someone'll come that'll have strength enough to back up legal rights on that land—an' that day, you'll be done, Flint Crawford!"

There was a moment when all stood taut and angry.

"I'm comin' back, some day," said Pinto very slowly. He turned to Verna. "Wait for me," he whispered.

"I will," she said vehemently.

"Oh, is that so," sneered the voice of Dale Crawford, son of Flint. He was just behind Pinto; a gaudy, swaggering, cocksure chip of his sire. "Well, she's too danged well built a woman to hang around here waitin' fer a jail-bird nester. I don't let no maverick heifers run loose on my range, an' she hangs around here. I'll be puttin' my brand on her!"

Pinto saw Verna look to Dale Crawford, her eyes wide with outrage. The calm he had held to so desperately ripped away, and with all his strength he tore loose, leaped, struck—and Dale Crawford fell. Then Dale surged up, blood on his face, his guns in his hands. Old Flint reached with one sinewy arm.

"A hell of a pass, fightin' over a nester girl," he blared.

The sheriff had hold of Pinto again. Dale laughed.

"All right," he jeered. "With you crippled, I'll be king of the Cross Diamond. An', I meant what I said." He slouched away. . . .

THAT was the memory Pinto Williams carried with him as he entered the gray gate at Canon City. It overtopped the tearful farewell of his widowed mother.

As months tramped by in gray-walled routines, that memory became red-seared while others dimmed.

Passing time wrought changes. Pinto's mother was laid to rest beside his dead father. Yarberry, Pate and Thompson, the neighbors, moved away, discouraged. Only Reeves stayed, for Dale Crawford had promised he would not be molested and Reeves had no stomach to move on to new fights if he could stay peacefully here. Verna tried to explain, but Pinto, embittered by this seeming compromise with the enemy, did not answer her letters after that.

A railway line snaked across the lava flats, skirted the cliffs at the east side of Lost Blue, and Reeves platted a town site, sold lots, built a store, then died in bed of a sudden illness. Verna managed the store. Lester, her brother, completed business school, and through Dale Crawford's efforts was appointed deputy county treasurer. People in the new town of Blue Bluff did not know Pinto Williams, and others forgot him. Only two remembered —the lawyer who fought for simple justice —and the girl who waited. . . .

Often when his soul hungered for the hour when he could return, Pinto Williams paced his cell, hands clenched. He was pacing restlessly when the word came that Clarence Budd's efforts finally had brought a full pardon—

Pinto was so certain he would find Budd in Comanche Springs when he returned it was almost a shock to find the lawyer was not in town. With that information came another jolt; old Crater County had been divided and the west half now was Crawford County with its court house at Blue Bluff. The Crawfords had put that division through. News of this change had not penetrated the walls that had held Pinto Williams, and he was strangely disturbed to find what had been done. It held

some kind of trickery. He sensed that instantly.

Budd was at the new county seat fighting a hot lawsuit of some sort. And because waiting for train connections would have brought delay, Pinto got a horse and rode the lava flats, as he had the first time they traveled from Comanche Springs to Lost Blue.

Sunset faded, shadows filled the valley, a first lamp was lit in one of the straggling frame houses of Blue Bluff as Pinto bared his head and knelt beside the graves on the low cliffs above Lost Blue. He had come to this wire fence enclosure where his father, his mother, and Verna's father lay, as though it were a rite to be performed before entering the near-by town, before facing into the hours just ahead.

He prayed with no audible words, but within him was a fiery dedication to see vengeance and justice wrought sternly.

LEAVING his horse at the livery, Pinto stepped along Blue Bluff's one street. A vague, but certain warning hit him. Big-hatted men, Cross Diamond riders he reckoned, stood tensely beside the barber shop, the pool hall, and the swinging doors of the Diamond Bar. As though someone had shouted the news, Pinto knew a man hunt was on in Blue Bluff—that the Cross Diamond trailed a man to kill him. In that moment, Pinto abandoned temporarily his plan to immediately locate Clarence Budd. He was taking a hand in this grim game.

He had come expecting to break open war; but here was war, going full tilt. The long hours he had hungered for it would not be denied, and he faced it smilingly.

Pinto loosened his guns. He wished he had Simeon David, the cattle rustler, with him. He had met Simeon, the terrier-weight warrior, behind walls at Canon; and Pinto had sought out Simeon in his first hours of freedom. Simeon, and the men he had gathered, would hit Blue Bluff early next day, but until then, Pinto had to play solo. The first move was to find who was being hunted.

A fellow barred his way as Pinto approached the hotel.

"Don't go in there," ordered the raspy voice.

"Any good reason why not?" countered Pinto.

"You understand English. I said, don't go in there." He spat.

"Sounds convincin'," agreed Pinto.

Whoever was being hunted might be cornered in that hotel. Pinto had to find out—find out who it was, too.

At the next cross street he turned, cut back to the rear of the hotel, and paused at the foot of the outside stairway that so generally is part of ship-lap, barn-walled hotels of cowtowns. He listened, then climbed the stairs lightly. He was on hair trigger as he stepped into the upstairs hall. He knew by the smell what that hall looked like; he'd seen scores of them. On either side were dog-kennel rooms with doors spaced regularly.

A match flamed; a man stepped into the hall.

"Say, Bascombe," blurted the man, "I'm short sighted, I'll admit, but Dale Crawford's blind. He didn't see lawyer Budd come in here. Dale's so crazy mad to lay hands on the lawyer after that court session today, Dale can't see straight."

The man lit another match and stomped into another room.

Pinto swallowed hard, caught his breath. The man hunt then was for Clarence Budd! Ten to one Budd was fighting the Cross Diamond in the courts, and they were up to their old methods of beating down opposition by gunplay.

Another man came from a room on the opposite side of the hall, almost at Pinto's elbow. This would be Bascombe, Pinto figured. The match burned Bascombe's fingers and the fellow swore.

"All rooms on my side of the hall are empty," he mumbled as he licked his burnt thumb. "Wait, I'll strike another light."

Pinto heard the rasp of the match, saw Bascombe's outline in the first flame, and then hit, hard and solid. Bascombe slipped into his arms with a soft-caught breath.

Pinto stood an instant listening. The other fellow was busy inside a bedroom. Pinto dragged Bascombe into the room from which the Cross Diamond rowdy just had emerged, lit one match to be sure of his bearings, and then working in the dark, using sheets as broad, muffling lashings, Pinto tied Bascombe to the bed.

In that moment he stood weighing the dangerous plan that had occurred to him, Pinto Williams took a deep breath as though he was about to plunge into something half-seen ahead. The plan he had thought of was dangerous, but it would give him a chance to be on hand to fight for Clarence Budd.

He had come hungry for war; and by all that was holy, he was going to get it —immediately.

With surprise working on his side, he might gun his way through this outfit single handed—and he'd try it if he had to in order to save Budd. War—plenty war! And he chuckled, slightly, as he nodded to himself in the dark.

CHAPTER TWO

Midnight Race With Death

THE plan Pinto Williams' quick action had started, was based on that near-sighted fellow mistaking Pinto for Bascombe. The last flicker of the match Bascombe had held, showed he was wearing a flat-crowned, stiff-rimmed drover's hat, unlike the high-crowns of the others. If the short-sighted man had recognized Pinto as Bascombe without that identifying hat, with it, Pinto in dangerous masquerade might even walk among others. If he got by, he could herd right along with this bunch, ready to jump into war, a surprise war, if they found Clarence Budd and tried for the lawyer's life.

It was risky—but living was risky. Without hazard, living would be stale. Pinto felt the high intoxication of the moment as he slipped into the hall, recovered Bascombe's flat hat, tossed his own battered high-crown into a room, and was waiting beside the outside door when the near-sighted Cross Diamond man came from the last room he was searching.

"Now why," rasped the owl-eyed fellow, "didn't we go where I said we'd find Budd in the first place. He's over at that Reeves store with that Reeves girl, sure as sin. Come on."

They went clumping down the stairway, trotted between buildings, rounded the front corner, and the man who had accepted Pinto as Bascombe, called the one who had stopped Pinto from entering the hotel.

"Say," said the fellow who had been in front, "you see any stranger shadowin' around in the back there? One went down the side street yonder, after I warned him away. Gun-fellow, he was. Stranger."

"I didn't see nobody; did you Bascombe?" said the short-sighted man-hunter. Pinto shook his head. "We've got no time to mess around with strangers now; not with Dale Crawford fawnchin' like he is. Come on, you two, let's high-tail it to the store."

Pinto followed a pace back of the others. Again he felt of his guns. They were ready. They might need to be any moment. He was walking right inside a ring of death if the truth were discovered.

"Say, look, somethin' goin' on there," said the man ahead. "Say, I'll bet Dale hisself went to the store. Look! They're bringin' two people out on the porch—one of 'em's that girl. Damn it! He's got to

drag her in an' it'll stir up some sort of hell sure as Christmas."

"Hey," called the voice of Dale Crawford. "Hey, where's Bascombe? You there Bascombe?"

Pinto felt his fiber string to a queer, strumming pitch.

"He's here," volunteered the near-sighted man. "We're both here!"

"All right," volunteered the near-sighted man. "We're both here!"

"All right," cracked out Dale Crawford. "All right; you two go get that team an' the two-seated buckboard. We've got old Budd. He's goin' for a visit to the Cross Diamond. An' Verna Reeves says she's goin' too—just to see that no skullduggery happens to him. As though we'd do anythin' to a guest, Verna."

Dale Crawford's laugh held more clear threat than if he had stated Clarence Budd was being taken to some tricky death.

"Yo're not ridin' along?" began the man beside Pinto.

"No," Dale snapped. "A gun-slung stranger's in town. One of the boys who was at the old trail said this fellow resembled Pinto Williams."

"Dale, if you turn loose your murderers on him—" began Verna, and something in her voice made Pinto Williams' heart leap.

"Say," cut in Dale Crawford, bawling to drown her voice, "if he's in town, he's come when hornin' in'll upset my plans more'n this lawyer Budd ever could. An' do you think I'd let Williams or anyone come upsettin' them now? Say, if he's in Blue Bluff, Williams will be wolf meat inside an hour."

Pinto Williams allowed his hands to caress heavy butts of his low-lashed guns. But he drew his fingers back as though they had been burned. Gunplay couldn't start here, no matter how he hungered for it. Too dangerous with Verna and Budd standing as shadows beside Dale Crawford. Pinto knew he had to keep masquerading as Bascombe; he had to play that game until he could get them and himself out of town. With all the Cross Diamond guns he had seen, that gang could go through this little town like a cyclone through corn shocks, tear it apart, drive Pinto into the open like a scurrying cottontail, and then a dozen guns would riddle him.

"Now get goin', you two," ordered Dale Crawford. "I'm nigh droolin' at the mouth to lay gun sights on this Pinto Williams—if it is him."

"Dale," broke in Verna, facing the Cross Diamond man. "Dale, if he is here—if it is Pinto, and you'll promise not to harm him—I'll promise you anything, Dale. I'll promise—to save him!"

For a moment Dale Crawford seemed to consider. Pinto Williams had a new struggle, then, at the sound of her voice, to keep from breaking into mad war. Then Crawford answered roughly.

"I've tried every other way," he said hotly, "to make you stop waitin' for this convict. If I find him, I may save him, an' make you make good on that promise. Maybe I won't. If he's in town, and drags a gun, I'll cut him down so fast—"

"You can't win with murder, Dale," burst out Verna. "You're drunk with the idea that your trickery is finally going to give you legal possession to Lost Blue meadows. You've just ached to have them legally yours for all these years. But this trickery, Dale, and murder, and—"

"Shut up!" blared Dale Crawford. "Shut up, or I'll not take Clarence Budd to the ranch an' just hold him there as you made me agree. Yeah; you don't even trust me that much; you've got to go along to see he don't get done to death on the way. Now shut up! I've put up with all the talk I'll take from any woman, even you!" He stopped, panting, in anger. "Hey, Bascombe, get that team an' buck-

board; what in hell's got into you. Now, hurry."

"Criminey, come on, Bascombe," whispered the man beside Pinto. "We don't want Dale pourin' his mad on us. He's so bleary-eyed with anger 'cause this Reeves girl's waited fer Pinto Williams. Oh, Lordy, there'll be happenin's in town tonight if they find him sneakin' around here. But I ain't hongry to see murder, air you, Bascombe?"

Through this tight-strung moment came damning accusation; Pinto knew now he was wrong in ever doubting Verna—wrong when he had stubbornly refused to write in answer to her pleading letters.

His jaws were aching and his teeth clenched tighter as he drove the fidgety team in front of the Reeves store.

"Bascombe, keep yore seat. Keep them lines tight," directed Dale Crawford. "Them ponies are skittish. Back the buckboard up here so we can histe Budd into the back seat. He's all tied tight. There, now lash him to the seat so he can't jump out. That's bueno. Now you fellows drive on the main Cross Diamond road, an' soon's we get this gun-totin' stranger run down, we'll be comin' after you, maybe with a fresh scalp of Mister Pinto Williams—if that fool has come hornin' in here."

Dale laughed loudly at his own talk.

Pinto felt Verna shudder as she sat beside him.

It was more than torture to just sit here, playing Bascombe, being careful light did not strike squarely and betray him instantly. And beside him he felt the inescapable soft touch of the girl—a touch he had hungered for through the long days and nights in prison.

PINTO sent the team into a scamper. Another angle of his plan had suddenly developed. If this Cross Diamond fellow with them was as near-sighted as he seemed to be, the team might he headed out of Blue Bluff not on the Cross Diamond road, but toward Comanche Springs. Something like a feeling of triumph came pounding up as Pinto got the team flipped over into the Comanche Springs trail at the edge of town.

"Where," demanded Verna suddenly, "are you taking us?" She turned in the seat.

"Say," said the Cross Diamond man in a startled yap. "Say, we're off the ranch road. What?"

Pinto pulled the team to a quick stop. He had to get that other fellow to where he could handle him as he had handled Bascombe. Then he could cut and run for it.

"What's the matter now?" demanded the Cross Diamond man.

Pinto climbed over the wheel, holding the lines. He was talking in a low voice to the near pony that had crouched under his hand. The Cross Diamond man fell for the trick. He came piling out.

"Near horse lame—" began Pinto.

"Say," burst out the Cross Diamond. "Say—" He struck a match, and it blazed directly in Pinto's face, blinding him an instant.

"Pinto!"

He only half heard that cry of Verna Reeves. It was like a wild overtone in a cataract of blurred motion, the shout of the Cross Diamond puncher, and the snort of the horses as they started, spooked by the match and the cry of Verna.

With every ounce in him, Pinto struck. He knew he had hit the Cross Diamond man squarely, on the chin—and the man fell like he had been pole-axed.

In the next instant, Pinto Williams was yanked, in a crazy, stumbling lunge, from his feet, thrown among the rocks, and dragged at the snarled end of the leather lines.

The ponies had the bits in their teeth and were running away.

Again he heard Verna cry. It was an eerie, untrue sound in the crash-shattered, numbing, plunging tangle into which Pinto Williams was being dragged.

A wheel caught him, a hoof grazed him, he got to his feet somehow, and tried to get a fresh hold on the lines. He grabbed frantically, lost it completely then, and with a last desperate lunge, he cinched the remaining line around his hand and wrist.

As the drag came on that, as he lost his feet again, as his head hit on lava rock, he sensed that the direction of the team had changed.

The horses were running madly, crazy with dark dread, wild with fright from the drag on the one line and his own hoarse shouting.

They were running—toward the cliffs above the Sink!

Pinto Williams knew he was on his feet an instant; but he was slipping into a tumbling, roaring, crashing void. He wasn't sure it was Verna crying out, calling his name. All he knew was that he was being yanked along, into a chaos that was all black, all brush, rocks, kicking hoofs, battering wheels, that would end in a blind plunge over the cliffs.

And then everything stacked up; all in a heap.

He got up—swayed stupidly. The horses were thrashing, as though in a net. He heard Verna crying out; something about the barbed-wire fence guarding the graves—

They had crashed into that. The team was stopped!

He had to get the line loose, get Verna and Budd out of that half-smashed buckboard before the broncs kicked loose and started again.

He faced that way; heard the team struggling behind him, knew they had torn loose from the singletree and were starting away toward the dark road to the Cross Diamond. Now Verna could get Budd free from the wrecked buckboard. There was plenty of time.

Pinto Williams folded up as an enveloping illness that started in the pit of his hoof-slugged stomach, engulfed him.

CHAPTER THREE

Death for a Stranger

IT was a slow trip down the mile-long foot trail from cliff crests to the old house on the Reeves' homestead. They decided that this was the nearest hiding place that promised reasonable safety for the night. They talked it over after Pinto had come out of hazy dizziness following the battering he had suffered during the runaway. The only other shelter would be in town, and Blue Bluff was ragged with danger.

They talked little as they worked down the trail. All felt as though some mysterious guiding hand had steered the runaway ponies into the one barrier which could block a plunge to almost certain death. Those guardian spirits, sleeping on the cliff, seemed to have intervened to stop the mad run of the horses. They climbed down silently, except for the labored breath of Clarence Budd.

Pinto Williams felt grim self-accusal weighing on him. Verna had kept her pledge—and he had doubted her. He felt unworthy. The hungry, eager grip she kept on his hand, her apparent willingness to be wholly content just in the knowledge he had come back, twisted and tore at Pinto Williams. He had doubted—she had remained steadfast.

At the log-walled house they masked windows, then lit a lamp. Across the oilcloth-covered table they faced each other. For seconds their throats were too tight with emotion to risk words. Verna reached

suddenly to get a fresh grip on Pinto's fingers.

"It's good—to see you again," she whispered.

He felt hang-dog mean. He did not think back, to measure the bitter resentment that had driven him to his acts. He was not the sort to excuse his faults. He acted, and took the consequences. Self-accusal raked through him now like a taloned beast.

"It's good to see you,' he replied. Queer tightness, dryness in that commonplace remark. By the light of the kerosene lamp he saw how beautiful she had become. All the promise of woman's beauty that she had been blessed with in those bygone days, had been fulfilled. She was a woman now, proud, steady-eyed—a woman for whom any man might fight with high abandon, to the last sobbing breath, the last howling bullet.

He was unworthy. But if the flame of powder that surely was ahead would burn out that unworthiness—

His face hardened into its shielding mask. He saw her eyes were questioning. He knew she sensed how much he had changed. And it drove him back farther behind the iron exterior under which he was flexible, high-tempered steel.

The second held, then broke suddenly in quick relieving talk.

"Not important now, what I've been doin'," stated Pinto. "Important thing is, what's Crawford tryin' to put over?"

Verna and Budd both started talk, stopped, then started and kept on, simultaneously, their words piling up and getting in the way of each other. But Pinto got the gist.

Crater County had been split. Dale Crawford had put over the county division. He'd figured out a way to get legal possession of the Lost Blue meadows, and forming the new county was his first smart move to grab these lands.

"Trickery," rasped Budd, his thin lips curling. "As they moved records from old Crater County to this new one, records were falsified; to show that Yarberry, Pate and Thompson, and you, Pinto, had not kept up taxes on your property. The records they substituted showed taxes never had been paid after those folks left Lost Blue."

"But even if the taxes are shown as delinquent," Pinto began.

"Records now show Dale Crawford has bought all delinquent tax sale certificates," countered Budd. "He holds those and has started suit in court to quiet titles; a suit, that if he wins, will give him indisputable possession of all the Lost Blue meadows except this Reeves place. I fought him today in court. I'd combed the whole West trying to locate you in the past few days, since you got free. I needed you to fight Crawford. Tonight he tried to kill me!"

"Well," said Pinto slowly, "I've got deeds for these ranches, from Yarberry, from Pate an' from Thompson, warranty deeds that I was goin' to record at Comanche Springs today before I found out that the county had been split. Has Crawford such a hold on these new county officials—?"

"He has," replied Budd. "He's forced the men he controls to arrange this steal." The lawyer turned to Verna. Her face was suddenly drawn and white.

"Never mind me," she said quickly. "Justice must—" She looked at Pinto, and said suddenly, "Did you also get the tax receipts from folks when you bought their Lost Blue lands?" she asked suddenly.

He pulled out a wallet, opened it, and spread out the receipted tax statements. Budd fingered them; frowned.

"Every one," he said quietly, seriously, "a death warrant—if Dale Crawford suspects you've got them. He knows you purchased those lands. And those old

records, the pages of the old Crater County books they took out when the county seat was set up here, must have shown tax receipts issued each year, taxes paid. Dale Crawford will kill you, son, before he'll let you record these or bring them into court in this new county!"

FOR a moment hush gripped the room. The lines in Pinto's face tightened. He had figured that he held the whip hand when he came back; held it because he had bought the lands from Yarberry, Pate and Thompson, and had the deeds and tax receipts. Now, at the first blow, he was under-dog—unless these rumpled and faded papers, backed by guns could bring a victory.

"Pinto," said Verna, "you don't know how not owning the Lost Blue meadows has built up war in Dale Crawford. He's always seen that some day, someone might get hold of them who could whip the Cross Diamond. Anyone who could take these lands, this water, and hold it, will drive him off this whole south range. He and his father always have feared someone might come—"

"I've come," said Pinto Williams, his voice suddenly hard. "I've come, and I'll drive them!"

Again hush filled the room; for only a moment.

"These changed records won't stop me," said Pinto more steadily. "I've got my whitefaces comin' in tomorrow forenoon, on the freight. I've got men comin', too. There are no soft men amongst them—who are afraid to face the Crawfords. I'm puttin' my whitefaces on Lost Blue meadows—an' let the Crawfords an' their Cross Diamond come! There's cause for war—as it stands—but I'll give 'em plenty more!"

As though he was started on a confessional he told them then, in a queer, drawn level voice; where h[e] had been, what he had done since he got out of prison. He had met Simeon David, the cattle rustler in prison and found him again when they both were free. Together they had gathered a band of fearless men, ex-convicts, most of them, but loyal to the death. With the help of Simeon and the others, Pinto had built up enough of a stake to buy the lands from Yarberry, Pate and Thompson; and enough beside to buy this herd of breeding stock that would come in on the freight in the morning.

He was risking it all; and he looked at Verna when he said that. He was risking all, because if he lost in this gamble—he'd loose everything.

"I've always prayed," he said as he slowed to a stop "that the Crawfords would not die, either of them before I could come." He turned to face Clarence Budd, and his jaw was craggy with tight muscles. "We'll play the legal game as far as it can be played," said Pinto, almost whispering, "but if we've got to play beyond that—we'll play, with lead chips!"

It was a new declaration of war. He had talked more that night than he had for many days. He had allowed that steely armor behind which he had learned to hide his feelings, to break, and this girl, this old, graying friend, had had a look into a deep, fiery chamber of his own soul.

LATER, under the stars, Pinto Williams stood with head back, hat off, the soft-blowing breeze that whispered down from the Wolftongues cool on his cheek. Just that touch steadied him. But as this flood of anger and resentment voiced against the Crawfords subsided, there came another thought that flogged and beat down on him. He felt that he had not measured up; that he had betrayed the trust Verna had put in him, while she had remained constant, even in the face of that rough, bruising campaign that Dale Crawford must have waged.

He stood long moments with clenched hands, locked teeth, eyes closed, and when he opened them the breeze was bathing his face, the cold stars were twinkling, and off toward the pine groves, coyotes set up a chorus of tumultuous yapping that somehow sounded free, and wild.

Then he walked; to the edge of the Lost Blue where deep pools were mirrors of the night sky; he stood where the river went with a sibilant rush into the chasm in the lava beds. Life was something like that. The Lost Blue in the mountains was dashing, alive, youthful; in the meadows of peaceful old age, the river was placid; and then here, at the Sink, the stream slipped into the dark unknown—perhaps to be reborn beyond a desert, to new life.

He had steadied by the time he turned back to the Reeves' ranch house. He came softly, patrolling. There were two certainties that sooner or later, would set the Cross Diamond gang on a rampage. Bascombe would be found tied up in the hotel. The near-sighted man who had been struck down by Pinto would add his report to that rumor already running through Blue Bluff that the son of Morey Williams was back in town. That would start a man-hunt that would make the one waged against old Clarence Budd look like a Sunday school picnic. The Crawfords would loose if they didn't get into action before Simeon David and the others came in. Their chance to corner Pinto Williams alone, with only his own guns to speak for him, would be gone for good when that gang on the stock train arrived.

Pinto came to the side gate that opened through the pole fence to the back porch. He stopped at the sound of voices. One was Verna's—the other a man's voice—not Clarence Budd.

"But if you found us here, they will," said Verna anxiously. "You say they found Bascombe!"

"Dale and all his gang are gettin' thoroughly drunk because they've not found Williams in town," said the man. "That may stop 'em from comin' here until mornin'."

"But then—?" Pinto Williams braced against the anxiety in Verna's voice.

"I tell you, Pinto Williams has got to be stopped before he produces those deeds and tax receipts in court!" The man's voice suddenly became frayed with fear and desperation. "If you care at all for me, you'll find a way to stop him from doin' it, too!"

There was a pause. Pinto gripped the top rail of the pole fence. A sort of black flame swept Pinto Williams and plunged his heart down, deep, into something like blind hell.

"I love you; you know that." He heard Verna say softly, steadily. "But I can't stand in his way, not now that he's come after all these years—"

"Then by God, I'll stop him!" The man's frightened voice burst out in the dark. "I'll stop him!"

THE man near the porch flung away, running, stumbling, as though blind with passion, toward the trail up to the cliff top. Pinto saw Verna run a few steps, then stop. And he heard a sob; a dry, hard sob, as though it tore through the heart of her soul.

He waited. She turned. He heard her gasp; and then whisper his name. She had seen him against the skyline. Still he waited, straight, a stern, black figure. Then she came forward, uncertainly.

"You heard, Pinto?"

"Yes. I did."

Her hands gripped Pinto's arms as though she were drowning. "Listen Pinto, that was my brother Lester. He's the county treasurer here. He's the one who forged those fake records. Dale Crawford forced him; understand, forced him to do it!"

"How?" There was both relief and accusal in that.

"A girl! Lester was in trouble with her. He was ashamed to come to me for money. He went to Dale Crawford. The girl died. Dale knows and he can send Lester to prison!"

She fought against sobs and her hands gripped tighter. "They can't; they can't do that to my kid brother! There must be some way out—some way. You can't file those deeds; you can't bring those tax receipts into court, no matter what Clarence Budd orders. Do you hear? If you do that my own brother will kill you! Pinto, promise me—!" She stopped. Her hands dropped. For a moment she stood there swaying.

"No," she said suddenly, and her voice was thin with new resolve. "No, I can't—I can't ask you; ask you to sacrifice your plans—after all these waiting years!"

She pivoted, ran, and he took a step, then stopped. The way he followed had been clear; straight war to the finish, with Crawford and the Cross Diamond.

And now—this! This—with the sobs of Verna Reeves in his ears.

Dale Crawford still held the whip hand—but soon, Pinto swore, he'd kill Crawford. He didn't think of the consequences. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except that here was his chance to make restitution to this girl who had been so true to him—to make amends for ever having doubted the steadfastness of her heart!

CHAPTER FOUR

Cause of War

BAWLING whitefaces shoved, jostled and bunted through the unloading chutes of Blue Bluff's stockyards. Simeon David was in command. The cattle rustler was a runty, bow-legged article, with button eyes set in a solemn visage. His nose was blunt, and his hairy hands dangled on surprisingly long arms. His hat, was prodigious. One felt that a gusty wind might catch it and carry Simeon away, if it were not for the heavy guns that weighted his legs. He was swarming over the board fences, into the emptying cars, through the pens, swearing, barking orders, whacking rumps of the cows.

"Git on," he ordered, spanking a reluctant cow. "Say, you old canner an' cutter, sashay an' promenade. You slab-faced, cross eyed, warble-eaten offspring of misfits, dang you—move!" He banged a board until it split, then prodded with the broken end.

A solemn six-footer, San Luiz Jim, an uncurried, unwashed bronc sort, came toward Simeon.

" 'Bout unloaded," remarked San Luiz. "Then what?"

"Puttin' 'em down on that river meadow land," said Simeon. "Shore yore powder's dry, San Luiz?"

The wild grin on the big fellow's beard-rough face answered. "Leetel fight," he suggested. "Bueno. That Pinto's *muchacha* ridin' with him when he was here just now?"

"That's her. I usta wonder what grade of woman could hold sitch as him, but God worry my saddle calusses, I don't wonder now atter seein' her."

"Yeah; an' him carryin' more hell in the neck than ary a man should—an' live," drawled San Luiz. "If Pinto comes uncorked, he'll go roarin' an bellerin' into a fight like you never seen before."

Simeon wiggled his red nose, shifted his cud, and nodded. "So I figger," he agreed. "You didn't expect nothin' different either when you come here with him; we all didn't. There comes Pinto. He been makin' sure no Cross Diamond fellers were hangin' around town."

Pinto reined in, and smiled thinly:

"Crawford's cowboys musta all got so drunk last night, gettin' up their courage to play gun-tag with me that when they got in their saddles, the ponies did the thinkin' an' jes' naturally took 'em back to the ranch. An' that gives us a chance to drive their stock, what ain't already trailed up to the south grass benches, off the meadows, an' pour down our stock into the valley. Let's get strung out."

The horses that had come in one of the stock cars were full saddled and ready. Two men remained to guard the cattle in the stockyards. The others swung in behind Pinto and Simeon. At the rim of the valley, Pinto stopped.

"You all know the play," he said grimly. "If you meet up with any Cross Diamond wolf, an' he grabs for his cutter, you pull without parley. Puttin' our stock down here, drivin' Cross Diamond stuff off these meadows, is full cause for war. So look out for it!"

They shelled the remaining Cross Diamond stuff out of willows along the Lost Blue. Cowhorses tailed Cross Diamond beef from the willows like a hound pack runs rabbits out of a sorgum patch. They hazed the last bunch up on the dry grass hills south of the meadows. Then trotted back two short miles to the stockyards, and drove the whitefaces Pinto had brought, down toward the Lost Blue.

Possession is nine points of the law; an old rule that still held, Clarence Budd had observed. But it was ten points out of ten as a cause for Crawford starting gunsmoke.

"Let 'em smoke," Pinto had remarked savagely. "Let 'em."

THE street of Blue Bluff became significantly deserted. When black clouds pile in the west, a town sometimes seems to scrooch down before the raging blast of storm hits; and Blue Bluff huddled and cowered, though the sun was bright and the little clouds were cotton-white. Perhaps the only person in town who did not fully realize what was hanging in the air, was the city judge who was substituting on the county bench. He was a mild little jurist, proud of his sideburns and worthy opinions.

Only the fact that Dale Crawford and his men had got drunker than lords had prevented them from splitting out a slab of war the night before. They'd have won against one man if they'd cornered him. Now, when they realized what their yelling-drunk had cost, when they saw Cross Diamond stock run off the meadows and Pinto's whitefaces driven on, they'd come fighting their heads like loco stallions. Pinto Williams had spread a feast of war. All that was needed now was the gun-hungry guests!

Forenoon drew toward the zenith, as Blue Bluff seemed gripped with dread more high strung than any that had gone before. The far mesas across the lava beds appeared to jig a nervous war dance. Sagebrush bleared in the uneven air that poured across the flats like thin, white syrup. Bushes that were only two feet high were distorted when seen through the bewitched air. Little shrubs seemed to stretch their necks, look in shivering fright toward Blue Bluff, then suddenly squat, and crouch like hard-bitten desert spirits seeking cover until the storm passed.

It takes two sides to make a war; and one had not come. But it would arrive soon. One of Cross Diamond riders had gotten lost in the shuffle, had slept in the livery hayloft, and had shaken out of the straw just before noon. He had sniffed the air, had a drink with a bartender who whispered news of Cross Diamond stock driven from Lost Blue—and the Crawford rider stuck his tail between his legs, got a livery horse, and hit toward

home at a gait which surprised even the livery pony.

War was on the way.

At about that same time, Clarence Budd faced the city-trained judge and asking for a postponment of the case of Williams, Yarberry, et al, versus Dale Crawford. This case was the last on the docket argued Budd. The judge could catch a train back to the city, and the request appeared well premised.

"Since your client just arrived in town last night, and you say you have not had time to prepare the case," said the Judge, "this seems a reasonable request. Granted."

The gavel fell closing the court session as the bristled lawyer who represented the Cross Diamond came blaring into the room, followed by the scared county official who had summoned him. His bluster in the next few moments only served to antagonize the prim judge. Crawford's lawyer cursed and threatened.

"If you don't stop this sort of talk, I'll declare court open again, and hold you in contempt of court," snapped the judge, and his sideburns bristled, more with jumpy fright than with outright anger. "Otherwise the order stands; Williams, Yarberry, et al, versus Dale Crawford is postponed to the next regular court session."

The Cross Diamond attorney simply swore, to himself, and got out before he lost his head and started his own fight.

DALE CRAWFORD and his gang had slept late at the ranch. Pinto Williams had scored. When Dale learned the situation he now faced, he'd go wild.

He did go wild shortly after he hit Blue Bluff later that afternoon. "By the Gods," he blared, smashing his fist on the Diamond Bar, "I've seen some of this same crowd try puttin' their cows in Lost Blue before—"

He stopped suddenly. Vividly he remembered that day—Morey Williams and Yarberry were facing the Cross Diamond men with Verna Reeves and Pinto Williams a little up slope. The cows were streaming down to the sweet water of the Lost Blue when the rifles opened. Cows tumbled, the herd stopped, the leader of these invaders was dragged away, to his death with his foot jammed in the stirrup. Dale Crawford bent over the bar, now, and took a raking breath. Those memories were mighty vivid.

"There'll be hell to pay—soon's it gets dark so we can sneak up on 'em," he whispered. "I know how to handle this sort of thing. I've seen it done. There won't be a live cow on the Lost Blue meadows when we get done. Whiskey—straight!"

Rumor spread. Night would bring slaughter—man and beast would be cut down beside the stillwaters of the Lost Blue. San Luiz Jim heard it talked in a low voice. A customer told another customer as San Luiz stood beside the thin partition in the Reeves store standing guard for Verna. Pinto had insisted on Jim guarding her.

San Luiz hesitated, then knocked at the closed door of the store office; he didn't like to interrupt—for Verna, Clarence Budd and Lester Reeves were going 'round and 'round in there, arguing. Still San Luiz figured this was plumb important so he knocked. Verna came to the door.

"Tell Pinto," ordered Verna after San Luiz reported. She closed the door so San Luiz couldn't get any more idea as to what was happening in that closed room. But he knew something damned high tension was happening there.

Sneaking out of town, San Luiz got the saddle horse he had cached in the stockyards. The big outlaw rode south, circling then down over the sloping, rounding hills on that side of the valley,

to where Pinto and his men kept loose herd on the whitefaces. The cows seemed content to rest after their railroad journey, or just fill with valley grass and good water.

"Dale Crawford's plan is better than I expected," said Pinto when San Luiz reported. "Simeon, flag in those others."

In the barroom, Dale Crawford drank whiskey straight and groomed his gang for the slaughter. Yellow would rise in their necks if he took them head-on, through daylight, into the face of gunfire. But give these men darkness, the right amount of raw liquor, and they would ride yelling to massacre. That was what Dale planned; total slaughter of Pinto, his men, his cows.

WAR and cause for war, built higher there as the sun dropped lower toward the Wolftongues. Down in the green valley, Pinto was making his war brew while Dale Crawford, on that lava bench to the east, nursed his taste for murder. But a crucial conflict that raged, not waiting for night, was going on in Verna Reeves' store office.

"I tell you, I'm scared stiff," whispered Lester Reeves. He had said that, that way, again and again. "I'm going to run for it."

His face was white, his thin features twitched, his dark scared eyes whipped from Verna to the gray, hard-breathing Clarence Budd, then back again to his sister. Lester Reeves was filled with wild stampede.

"Last night you were going to kill Pinto Williams," she accused.

"I know," husked Lester. "I know; but you know I was just talking. You know that, sis. I'm running—"

"You're staying." Verna's voice was a command. "And you're going to put back those old Crater County records that show the taxes were not delinquent—"

"I can't," said Lester. "I thought I'd let Dale win his lawsuit. I thought I could keep those old pages I took out of the Crater County ledger; all sealed in that plain envelope, and then if he ever tried to threaten me later I'd have him. But I can't put them in the new county ledger now. I can't do that. He'd slaughter me!"

He had said that, too, many times. He faced Verna. "Don't look at me like that," Lester blurted. He whirled on Clarence Budd. "You too—don't you look at me like I was a low down, sneaking, thieving crook."

"Verna's told you," said Budd, "why Pinto is forcing a fight. He's going to kill Dale Crawford to save you, to save your sister the heartbreak, of Crawford sending you over the road."

"Stop it!" Lester Reeves clenched his fists. "Stop it. You make me feel like a criminal!" He looked, then, wide-eyed. "Criminal!" Lester breathed it softly. "What if I am," he blurted. "What if I am! Crawford would make me a worse one. He's the one!"

Lester Reeves clenched his hands. Then he faced Verna.

"I'm a pretty poor sort of a thing to be brother to you, sis," said Lester Reeves, and there was a driving force in his voice that made her suddenly clutch tight hold of the chair arms. "I'm a pretty poor stick; but I'd be a poorer one if I threw you down in this. You've made me see it, both of you. I have to thank you for that. So, thanks. I'm putting the true records back in the ledgers before they go into the vaults tonight."

He snatched up his hat, went slamming out of the door, as though he had to run if he were to carry out this promise before he lost the strength to fulfill it.

"He'll do it?" asked Clarence Budd, his voice thin and tired.

"He's never broken a promise to me in

his life," said Verna slowly. "He'll not go back on this one—if it kills him. He's not all spoiled and bad but Dale Crawford would make him so if Dale could. I've got to tell Pinto—before he meets Dale."

"This won't stop what's standing between them," said Budd.

"I know, but I've got to try." She shuddered a little. "With all that is driving Pinto Williams to war, with Dale Crawford hungry for Pinto's life—" Her voice trailed off into silence.

THE clatter of horses broke the tense quiet of Blue Bluff as Verna Reeves, dressed in breeches, boots, leather jacket and old range hat, was leading her horse out of town in the general direction San Luiz had taken. Dale Crawford and his Cross Diamond men were heading north, in the opposite direction from Verna's route. They cantered out past the graveyard, past the wreck of the buckboard, as though going toward home. It was a ruse; everyone knew that. They would circle back, come into Lost Blue Valley from the north, down over the sloping grassy hills, and with them would ride Death.

From the edge of town, Verna rode openly. The Wolftongues in the west brought early night to the valley; and it was getting dusk up on the lava bench. She had to find Pinto before it became so dark friend or foe could not be recognized. Something like panic touched her when she headed down into the dark of the valley and could not locate Pinto and his riders where they had been all day long. Then she saw them coming, driving shadowy stock, into the dark of the valley, into the blackest part of the thickets beside the Lost Blue. She called, and then rode, as men finished hazing the cows into the low scrub timber. Pinto watched, listened to Verna's story of how Lester was putting back those pages from the old Crater County records; why he had saved them as a counter weapon against Dale Crawford. Now those pages would do their part in proving Pinto had legal title to the Lost Blue meadows. He might win now without war.

He nodded, almost absent mindedly, as though he did not fully comprehend. She repeated her statement, and he nodded again.

"You don't understand," she said half angrily.

"Yes, I understand," he said, and his voice was so hard and repressed she was startled. "Whatever's happened up there on the bench can wait—what's goin' to happen here, can't." He turned to Simeon David. "The first Cross Diamond riders have just dropped down over that hill yonder. We better get back a mite an' let them enjoy themselves. Come along."

He sent his horse trotting. She spurred up beside him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "Have you lost your mind? San Luiz told you they were going to shoot the stock."

"He told me," said Pinto hoarsely. "But I can't explain what's happening now—I've got to get you out of this. Come along."

He caught the bit of her horse, spurred into a fast trot. Back of them a rifle spoke; a cow bawled. Then more rifles barked in the darkness. As they swung, they saw cows stampede out of the thickets, go charging south from the stillwaters. Rifles broke. Pinto's men cut loose with powder and lead, and the cows, startled, mad with excitement and the stink of death among the willows, went bellowing and racing, and stumbling back to the north side of Lost Blue.

"Pinto!" Verna hauled back on the reins. He swore, savagely, and dragged her horse along, while lead whinned through the first velvet of night that had filled into the valley.

ON THE first hill south he stopped. There were bursting salvos of gunfire behind them. Cows bawled, came plunging out toward the south, as Crawford's men drove the crazed beasts back from the north side of the stream. The men with Simeon and San Luiz opened fire then, and only straggling remnants of the stock, frenzied shadows in the valley floor, went plunging back to meet death on the north river bank where Dale Crawford yelled in crazy triumph.

Verna turned to Pinto. His face was dark and shadowy.

"Your men—were shooting your cows," she stated, and there was surprised questioning in her challenge.

He shook his head. "Not my cows," he said. He waited a moment, and they heard Simeon shouting to Pinto's men, and coming toward them, while Crawford's gang, daring them to fight, set up a derisive yell. "Nobody's shot down my cows. My whitefaces were shoved up on the hills to the south just at dark."

"Then those cows—" began Verna.

"Those cows were all Cross Diamond stock, comin' in as usual from the dry grass hills, to bed along the Lost Blue," he stated. "We just bunched 'em an' hurried 'em along so they'd be on hand at the right time an' place. With our help, Dale an' his gang's just about wiped out the Cross Diamond's southern herd."

He sighed raggedly. "If they'd not been so blind with liquor an' hate, they'd have seen—there wasn't a whiteface cow in that whole bunch."

"But when Crawford finds this out?" she questioned.

Pinto was quiet a moment. "They'll know how it feels to be driven off land they have looked on as their own," he said slowly. "My father tasted that; an' I've known how it feels. The Crawfords must have a drink of that same sort of brew before I—smash 'em!"

"You're hard, and relentless!" Her voice was half pleading.

"I have a right to be," whispered Pinto Williams. "Vengeance is mine!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Guns Sign the Finish

CROSS DIAMOND gunmen were celebrating, and the Diamond Bar rocked with their blasphemous voices.

"An' didn't they turn coyote an' run," remarked one man.

"'Course," said Dale Crawford. "Nesters always lack guts. Drown yore troubles for they're good as gone."

They drank, then turned, at the sound of Flint Crawford's voice. The old man had come shuffling through the door, and had heard the last of Dale's statement. Flint's vacant eye socket was covered with a patch, his crippled arm jerked as he swayed a little to keep his balance, for his twisted body bent meanly to one side.

"So y'killed that dam' nester's son?" asked Flint his eye centering on his own son. His voice was loaded with old hate.

"What's the use? We tore him apart instead, countered Dale. "Listen to what we done without a man of ourn bein' scratched." He told how stock on the Lost Blue was cut to pieces. The others chimed in.

"An' you didn't follow him an' kill him, after what he done to me," raked out Flint. "Well, you yaller-gutted wonders, I'll go kill my own meat. I've brought my shotgun, an' I'll hand him the same dose he did me, only nearer center."

Flint went hobbling through the door, out to the single seat buggy that he had driven to town.

"If he's goin' on the warpath, we better back him up," said one of the men.

"You stay put," Dale Crawford ordered sharply. "The old man's gettin' tougher an' tougher to live with, an' if he goes

after this Pinto Williams, they may do for each other; then I'll not have either one of 'em tryin' to tell me what I kin do on my range."

FROM the front porch of Reeves' Store, Pinto saw Flint go into the Diamond Bar, then come out through the swinging doors, and then re-enter, carrying the heavy old shotgun. Pinto turned to Clarence Budd.

"The Crawfords an' all their bunch are inside that buildin' right now," said Pinto. "It's one good chance to tell 'em all they're through."

"You wouldn't try to go in there and do it?"

Pinto did not reply for a moment, then shrugged. "I'd have fought it to the finish if it hadn't been for Verna an' you," he said. "You both arguin' for relyin' on law an' standin' against any more gun business—well, it's for the sake of you an' her I'm givin' the Crawfords their chance to pull in their horns an' turn civilized. 'Bout the most satisfaction I'll get will be seein' their faces when I tell 'em how bad they're beat, with the old records back, an' all. I wouldn't miss it when they learn what I'm goin' to tell 'em."

"If they don't believe you when you say they're finished?" suggested Budd.

Pinto shrugged. "It's funny how things sort of repeat sometimes," he mused. "We come in here an' Flint tells us where to head in. Tonight I'm on the tellin' end. I'm goin' to relish it, too."

"You figured you were going to go into the Diamond," said Budd, "when you asked Verna just now, to put those deeds and tax receipts in the big store safe."

"Just a precaution," agreed Pinto. "If I get cut down, you'll still have the legal set-up to break the Crawfords. If I shouldn't come out, half interest in cows an' land goes to Verna—half to my partners." Pinto hitched his holsters to hang where he wanted them, and turned to Budd. "Don't eat no dirt, Clarence," he said, and there was a high level of grim humor in his words—the taut taunting chuckle of a man who was about to face death and well knew it.

"You expect them to start gunning for you," said Budd sharply.

"I'm hopin' maybe they do," drawled Pinto.

He stepped off the porch, called Simeon David and San Luiz to his side, and the others, sensing something of what was up, fell in step just a little in the rear. As they reached the streaks of lamplight that splashed out from the windows of the Diamond Bar, the men stopped, and on low-spoken orders, spread around the saloon building. Each one there would have gone in through that door with Pinto—not one of them questioned Pinto's right to go alone and face down this outfit—if he had it in him.

If Pinto Williams didn't come back from that building safe and sound, men whose eyes were steady and sharp on the shadows moving beyond the Diamond's windows, would wreak full vengeance.

Verna came out of the store with her brother as Pinto stopped a moment, outside the swinging doors of the Diamond Bar. There had been steady earnest talk on that porch after Pinto had brought his men into Blue Bluff to watch the Crawford gang; a canny move, for it allowed Pinto's crew to keep contact without their whereabouts being known, and be ready to block anything the Cross Diamond might start.

"Pinto," said Verna, "I've put the receipts and deeds—" She stopped. "Where is he?" she demanded, and there was a spiraling lift to her voice that was almost a frightened cry. Then she saw him. "What's he doing going there?" she cried, catching hold of the lawyer.

"Serving notice on the Crawfords—telling them they're done, and why," stated Budd.

"You didn't stop him? They'll gang him. Why didn't you stop him?"

"Could you have stopped him, do you think?" challenged Budd.

"No—no I know I couldn't," she said suddenly. "I couldn't have stopped him, but I can go in there with him!"

Then Budd and young Reeves watched her running, watched her stop, halted by Simeon, and in the same moment, Pinto Williams stepped inside the Diamond Bar.

THE hush that hit through that room was thick with impending death. For a moment Pinto Williams let it hold; then he started to talk in a level voice.

"The Cross Diamond is through in Lost Blue," he said. "Yo're through! An' you better listen to why you are. My guns are ready, an' I promise you, I'll get the first five before you can floor me—an' after that, my men will come in from outside."

He saw the eyes of those men flicker. He saw the boiling hate in the twisted face of Flint; the startled, uncertain, angry emotion that was lashing through Dale Crawford. And it was good to see.

"Yo're through, an' here's why."

The old records were back in the county ledgers; those old pages that were the true records transferred from Crater county, the leaves from the ledgers that Lester Reeves had kept so some day he would hold a counter weapon against the bullying and threatening of Dale Crawford. Deeds; and old, certified tax receipts were inside the stout, new steel safe that Verna Reeves had installed to protect the store's cash.

And Pinto told them, with a queer dry, hard smile in the corners of his mouth, of what had really happened at the first full darkness tonight, down in the valley of the Lost Blue.

"Our stock—" began Dale. "Those cattle—" His voice jammed in his throat.

Old Flint's face was purple; he turned on his son, and cursed, with all the bitter fullness of his twisted old soul.

"I'm givin' you an hour," began Pinto, and the edged lash of his voice blocked violence for that moment. "Crawford, get yore men out of town, quiet, an' peaceable, or—"

"I'll shoot you—" began Flint Crawford, his voice so like the howl of a maimed wolf.

Pinto heard a sound back of him. The doors were opening. Again the brittle, deadly stillness hit that room.

"If you shoot that gun, you'll kill me too," said Verna Reeves quietly just at Pinto's elbow. "And I'm unarmed."

Pinto tried to tell her to get out. He tried to tell her that Flint Crawford didn't care what or who he killed, just so he killed, just so the gun ripped the life from Pinto Williams. But the dry, screaming stillness seemed to have strangled him, and frozen the others to stark stiffness, like corpses hours dead.

Again the muzzle of Flint's shotgun started to rise.

"If you harm that girl," whispered Dale Crawford, "I'll kill you, with own hands."

The shotgun muzzle stopped rising Surprise washed and twisted Flint's face Pinto caught hold of that moment, and spoke again.

"You've got an hour to get out of town," he stated. "You're on my range, an' I'm warnin' you off. You better believe me when I say yo're done on the range controlled by the Lost Blue."

With eyes narrowed, alive to every tiny detail of that group of half-crouched men near the bar, alive also to the spectacle of old Flint Crawford with murder flaming all through him, and his own son's threat staying his trigger finger, Pinto Williams backed through the doors. He

dared not lift an arm to guide Verna, nor turn the fraction of an inch away from that room.

If he did, if his hands were not ready to sweep, draw, and kill, that gang would jump to war with a roar.

Murder was in that room; full, boiling murder, and only his steady eye, the force of the cold hardness that had been pounded so deep into his soul, held that pack from leaping to the kill.

CHAPTER SIX

Vengeance Is Mine

HOOFBEATS of the Cross Diamond horsemen riding out of town came clearly to the shadowy group standing on the porch of the Reeves store.

"It worked," said Clarence Budd. "Drunk as they were, they must have known this was their finish in Lost Blue."

"I'm glad," said Verna. "Maybe now there will be peace."

"They've stopped," said Simeon suddenly.

"No, there are horses trotting," remarked Lester Reeves. "The sounds are plain enough. I'll feel a lot better with Dale out of town."

"Only part of the outfit stopped, an' now they're goin' on again," said Simeon.

Pinto Williams only partly heard the comment. Half an hour had passed since he had backed out of the Diamond Bar after giving his ultimatum to the Crawfords. There had been high-voiced argument in the Diamond Bar, with those voices boiling over, out, into the night. Then the men had tramped out, climbed aboard their horses, and started peaceably enough toward the ranch. Old Flint Crawford's team still was tied to the hitch-rail. And that was a sinister note!

A feeling of hungry disappointment welled up inside Pinto Williams. Somehow, Verna's hand, tight gripped in his, compensated a lot. Maybe she was right; maybe the Crawford's were wise enough to know that the end of their iron-fisted hold on these meadows, this range, was finished; or at least Dale might see it, see he was whipped, and prefer to retire gracefully instead of jamming into a hot lot of trouble with the Cross Diamond on the wrong side of the law.

But old Flint, nursing his heavy-loaded shotgun, alone over there in the Diamond Bar was a man who would not give an inch. He, alone, was threat enough to scout the idea of total peace.

This thing was not over. It couldn't end this way after all these years.

"Say, look," burst out San Luiz from over by the store corner. "Look quick, there's somethin' afire over there—just down the street!"

"Horsemen—say!" Simeon's yelp was like the yap of a terrier sniffing trouble. "They circled back on us."

"The courthouse," cried Lester Reeves. "It's the courthouse. Say, listen, Pinto, you told them those records were in the vault in the treasurer's office. Dale Crawford knows that vault isn't fireproof."

"Those ledgers—" began Pinto, and he started running in the same breath.

"Scorched to a crisp," finished Lester, and he was running too as out from the side of the building, hoofs drumming, came the men who followed Simeon and San Luiz Jim.

"Drive them!" shouted Pinto. "Drive Crawford's gang away an' we'll get to the vault!"

THE war had broken out afresh. The shifting, boxing, countering and dodging were past. And deep within Pinto Williams a yelling, shouting madness came surging.

The burst of rifles from back of the courthouse answered the challenge.

"Por Cristo! Sangre!" San Luiz bawled above all the noise in the space around the frame building.

The thunder of the charge swept around the corner of the courthouse. On foot, in the wake of that rushing, rifle-roaring smash, Pinto and Lester Reeves ran side by side. Beyond the building there was screaming, the sound of a horse done to death, the agonized yell of a man mortally torn with lead. And beyond, lighting the tangle of war, were the flames that were catching hold of the pine boards of the courthouse and devouring them ravenously.

"Keys—got 'em?" husked Pinto as he and Lester plunged up the plank steps.

"Here," gasped young Reeves. "Lord, that fire's got such a start."

The front door of the little frame courthouse swung open and the hallway billowed out smoke.

"Bend low," ordered Lester. "Here—take my hand. Now—run low!"

They went through a half open door into the treasurer's office and came to the metal door of the vault.

"Got to have a light; got to see the combination," whispered Lester.

Pinto fumbled, struck a match, held it close. Glass crashed and the whine of a bullet ended in a smacking thud. The steel door that so falsely gave the impression of a stout vault back of it, jarred with the impact. Pinto puffed out the match—

"Got it," whispered Lester Reeves. "Here are my books; all of 'em, where I put 'em tonight when I closed the office."

Pinto turned, and met the threatful blast of flame that burst past in the hallway ahead.

"Out the side door," ordered Lester. "The Cross Diamond bunch is on the other side."

They started out the side door. A gun broke directly in front. The red flames of the fire threw uncertain illumination on that scene. They dropped beside the steps at the side entrance. On the far side of the building, they heard both gangs of riders go tearing out toward the stockyards. It was a running fight.

Someone laughed out in front—Dale Crawford.

"Some smart hombres, those men of yo're, Williams," he taunted. "Followin' my bunch while I've got you cornered here—both you an' that Reeves kid, where I want you. You'll fry—or get cut down when it gets too hot an' you run."

"Can you make it through to get out a window on the other side?" demanded Pinto.

"I can try," snapped Lester.

"Then travel," ordered Pinto. "He'll see you luggin' those books after you get clear of the buildin' but I'll try to keep him awful busy so he can't stop you. Run for the store. An' warn Verna."

He heard Lester Reeves cough in the smoke inside; heard him go thumping and bumping into a wall. Then Dale Crawford cut loose; as though he sensed what was going on against the background of that fire and was going to clean out Pinto Williams so he could turn and get Lester.

PINTO shot; but knew he missed. Dale Crawford had jumped to new cover.

The fire at Pinto's back was scorching. Once it broke fully through the board sides of the building he must leave by, quickly, weaving, fighting, driving Dale Crawford before him. Crawford cut loose again, firing around the side of the building, and Pinto knew he had sighted Lester.

With a curse, Pinto flung lead. He saw the shadow of Dale Crawford running to new cover; over toward the frame hotel. The lights in town suddenly had gone out; only the lifting, crackling torch of the burning courthouse, Crawford's

courthouse, lit the scene with an angry glare.

The guns in Dale's hands jumped again, and Pinto heard Lester cry out. He located Verna's brother—a stumbling, running, blundering spot in the night. Lester wasn't down yet—but he had been hit.

Pinto fired carefully and saw Dale dive away, out of danger. Then he went thundering after him, reloading as he ran, and in the lull of gunfire, he heard his men, and the Cross Diamond gang out toward the stockyards yelling, cursing, and burning the air with killer's powder.

Again Dale Crawford ran out from cover; and again the blistering fire of Pinto Williams drove Dale back. They were beginning to see each other by the fire's light as they dashed from one safety spot to another.

Then the gun of Dale Crawford spoke again—over toward the Reeves store. And Lester was shouting something wild, terrified, beyond the barber shop building.

Open country in front of Pinto; open stretch he had to make to get to where he could blast Dale out of that place where the Cross Diamond man had forted up.

Lead raked close, screeched for his life and breath. He bent and dodged, and as he ran, his own guns answered. A chance shot got to Dale Crawford and sent him plunging out into the street. He was still shooting with one hand and Pinto knew he had winged Crawford.

"Help!" shrilled Crawford, the fear catching and clawing him. "Help. Flint; help!"

Out from in front of the Diamond Bar came a queer, hitching, stumbling figure; Flint Crawford. He came cursing, his shotgun held high in his hand, like the crook of a hell-spawned shepherd. He was bawling something thickly. And Pinto knew the old fellow was more than half drunk.

Dale Crawford turned then; and came plunging toward Pinto, his gun spitting. Desperately Pinto cut away at him and knew he'd missed. He plunged to meet Dale as both their guns clicked empty. Pinto knew he had to stop Dale, and someway stop old Flint. The older Crawford was bellowing in a strange, ragged high voice; bellowing with the red lust of a killer gone mad.

Pinto hit Dale. Dale's clubbed gun sent Pinto reeling, and Pinto struck again in the same instant. Dale Crawford stumbled back.

"Where is he? Where is he?" old Flint was yelping. "There he is, the son of a—!"

The shotgun blared. Pinto, surprise flogging through him, saw Dale Crawford buckle in the middle. And even as the scream of Flint's stricken son pierced the mad moment, the other barrel of the gun blasted.

Lead caught Dale Crawford this time between the shoulder blades and knocked him into the dust of the street.

"I got him," blurbed Flint. "I got him. I shore got him!"

"You shot Dale!" yelled Pinto crazily. "An' I got you covered so don't try for me."

Flint knelt suddenly and must have realized then his own son was there flat and dying instead of Pinto Williams. With a wail that wrenched and writhed, old Flint spun up, stood, tottering, screamed again in the agony that had come to him with the realization of his mistake, and then he fell, to his crippled knees, and bent over the body, sobbing, calling Dale frantically.

THERE Verna and Lester and Clarence Budd found them; Dale dead by his father's hand; old Flint sobbing like a woman over her lost first born; Pinto

Williams, a straight, black, waiting figure, like a shadowy ghost of judgment, his guns reloaded, just standing, and looking, and not able to say a word because suddenly his throat was tight and he couldn't speak.

Then the riders came, following Simeon David; all returning but half of them wounded after that clash from which they had just emerged. There were dead Cross Diamond men, out there in the litter of the stockyards; others riding out over the flats as though to circle and head back to the Cross Diamond—the Cross Diamond whose day had been long and blazing, but whose finish now was being knelled in the sobbing of the crippled, broken old man.

They carried Dale Crawford away. And they led old Flint as though he was a grief-crushed child.

Pinto Williams did not follow the little group into the lamplit room of the Diamond Bar. He turned slowly away and headed out toward the lava bench where three graves were enclosed by tight strung wire against which was stacked the broken wreckage of the buckboard.

Cattle were lowing down in the meadows of the Lost Blue—Pinto's cattle—bald-faced animals. Back at the far side of the little town the tinder-dry, resinous walls of the courthouse that had been built to serve the Crawfords in their crookedness, were falling in on the dying flames.

But against the last of that red glow that seemed like a war dying a blood-red death, Pinto saw Verna coming. He waited for her. And when she called his name, he answered.

"I knew I'd find you here," she said as she came to stand beside him. "I had to come—after I did what I could back there. Somehow—" She stopped, her hand got hold of his as they faced the graves and the valley beyond where the reflections of a white star blinked up from the still waters of the Lost Blue. "Somehow I felt you needed me, by your side."

He whispered as he answered. "I do need you. Do you remember my vow?"

"Yes—vengeance!"

"Well, somehow I couldn't finish it," he said thoughtfully. "Just seein' old Flint there on his knees sobbin'— I was changed, that day they sent me away from you, to prison—an' right now. . . . I don't know. Maybe I can get back, to somethin' like my old self. If you'll help me make the grade."

"I will." Her voice was eager and soft.

For seconds they were quiet, looking down into Lost Blue. Then Pinto lifted his face a little.

"It's mighty peaceful down there," he remarked, "I always thought of myself as an instrument of justice—but there, at the last, it was took plumb out of my hands, an' I'm glad. Glad. 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord; I will repay.'"

He looked toward the fire-splashed town; to the valley and the Wolftongues beyond; in the direction of those quiet graves; and then he turned, to hold out his arms to the girl who had waited. . . .

THE END

WALT COBURN

The Tophand Cowboy Author
Has Written Another Moving Western Novelette

For the October Star Western

OUT SEPT. 5TH!

GALLOWS NAIL

By Foster-Harris

(Author of "Colt, Pants and Vest.")

Faro Ann, it seemed, was dallying lightly in love—while the life of a youngster she liked hung on a broken gallows nail. . . .

THE cavalry trumpets of Fort Griffin, up on the hill, were sounding tattoo. Down in The Flats below, in the turbulent frontier town, men twisted uneasily to listen. Buffalo hunters halted their whisky glasses halfway to bearded mouths. Hard bitten cowmen shifted on high, rowelled heels. Gamblers glanced coldly up from their cards and the laughter of the honky tonk girls seemed suddenly just a little too loud.

Not that the brazen, mournful wail of the far-away trumpets in itself meant anything—but tonight that sound was strangely eerie.

The red coals of what had been that mysterious gallows still smoldered in the street before the big Beehive Saloon. The

defiant curses of Rojo Dolan still hung in the air. Ordinarily, by this time of night, The Flats was well launched into its usual drunken, riotous revelry. But not tonight. Tonight it was still.

Somehow, that hush was like the uneasy pause before a storm.

Maybe there was going to be a storm —of sorts. That ominous gallows had meant something. Mouthing oaths, Rojo Dolan had burnt it. But there still were plenty of cottonwood trees that grim Vigilantes might put to use. And, hard-faced killers, desperadoes, the scum and dregs of the Texas frontier, sat in the saloons and wondered. . . .

Smoke wreathed about the lamps in the Beehive. Over at her table in the corner, Faro Ann riffled the cards in her long, white hands. She talked with little Smoky Withers, the crippled carpenter who had built that gallows. Maybe she was coaxing him to tell who had hired him. Nobody else had been able to extract his secret.

"I promised not tuh talk," old Smoky had informed the sullen, curious crowd watching him erect that scaffold. Hammer in hand, he had looked down at them. "But thar's no law again yuh guessin' who this is fer—and why," he had added thoughtfully.

The onlookers had grinned—or snarled. No, there was no law in The Flats against guessing. There was damn little law, for that matter, against anything else.

The troops up there in the fort were for the protection of this frontier against Indian raids. With the affairs of the town they did not interfere. Trail camp, capitol of the hard case buffalo hunters engaged in destroying the vast southern herd, The Flats, thus far, had known mainly six-gun statute, Colt ordinance.

But now stern law rule was on the way. With a chill, the killers sensed the threat. That gallows had been the first Vigilante warning, they were sure.

Maybe the Vigilantes could even make that threat good. Maybe they couldn't. Rojo Dolan, at least, had promptly challenged them. And Rojo, kingpin gunman of The Flats, boss hunter, killer, boasted that if they tallied him, they'd be doing well, indeed!

There were plenty of tough hombres to back Rojo's play; and lick his boots in the meantime. Several of them were in the Beehive now. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched the two at Faro Ann's table, strained their ears, and didn't learn much.

She was quite a mystery herself, that Faro Ann. Good lookin', with her red-gold hair, green eyes and white skin, she was an ace gambler. But straight as a string as far as men were concerned. No man ever went to her home, on the outskirts of town. She didn't drink, didn't associate with any of the other women. No one knew her past; or even her real name.

She was saying something to Smoky Withers now. Reluctantly, he nodded and half turned. His voice lifted a little, so that they could hear what he said.

"Well, all right, Miss Ann. I will go home. But, heck—who'd pick on me? Everybody knows I was jest hired tuh build it." He straightened his bent shoulders, smiling, a harmless, friendly old fellow, plenty likeable.

"I'm the only real carpenter in town, yuh know," he said proudly.

"You haven't said who hired you," reminded Faro Ann quietly. "That's something some others might like to know."

"They've done ast me." Smoky's leathery smile widened. "But I didn't tell. Promised I wouldn't, yes'm."

He bobbed a farewell and started casually toward the door. He wasn't expect-

ing any trouble. He didn't know that death would be waiting for him, right there on the way out. . . .

BUT it was. Limping, Smoky Withers nodded casually to an acquaintance, started to step through the doorway. He heard a snarl of gratified surprise. A big shoulder drove into his chest, knocking him roughly back. Gasping angrily, he looked up, into the red face of Rojo Dolan.

There were little, scarlet flecks in the big gunman's eyes. The smoky lamplight brought them out. His thick lips curved in a merciless grin as he stared at the little carpenter. His voice was sneering, contemptuous.

"Been lookin' all over fer you, Withers. Want yuh to tell me, who was it hired yuh tuh build that gallows."

There were other men behind Dolan. They flowed silently around the two, forming a tight, hard circle. Smoky Withers straightened, drawing a slightly shaky breath.

"Why, I—I cain't tell yuh, Dolan," he spoke up dauntlessly. "I passed my word I wouldn't tell nothin' when they hired me, yuh see. And I—"

"Yore word—hell!" sneered Dolan. "Yuh damn nail pounder! If yuh think yo're gonna keep shut mouth about raisin' a scaffold fer me, why think ag'in! Pronto!"

His stare was infinitely ugly, chill. Something twisted in his huge fingers. A nail, it was, Withers saw—fire blackened, bent, one of the nails from that burnt gallows.

"What makes yuh think it was meant fer you, Dolan?" Withers asked stiffly. "They never said—"

"Who else would it be fer?" There was the swaggering pride of the killer in Dolan's snarl. "I run this camp, don't I? Tryin' tuh scare me, you and yore yellow Vigilantes!"

His laugh was barking. "Well, yuh gonna tell?" he crackled. "I ain't messin' with yuh long, nail pounder!"

Old Smoky Withers' lips were a little white. He started to shake his head. With an angry oath, the big gunman reached out, ripping the point of that nail across the carpenter's face.

It brought a spurt of blood before Smoky could fling up a gnarled hand and jerk the nail from Dolan's fingers. Stepping back, the red gunman dropped into a crouch, thumbs hooked into the cross-belts just above his ivory handled guns.

"Last chance, damn yuh! Gonna talk?"

Again Smoky Withers shook his head dazedly. His dogged voice wavered just a little. "I cain't, Dolan. And I—I'm not heeled."

What happened then was fast and blurred. Most likely it was all prearranged. The tight wall of men behind Withers split right and left, opening up a path for bullets. Somebody cried out in a loud voice, "Here's a gun for yuh, carpenter. Tally him!" There was the blasting roar of a shot. Then the lightning flash, the iron thunder of Rojo Dolan's right hand Colt, pouring death into the staggering Smoky at arm's length range.

It was all over in the tick of a clock. That dazed look still on his mild, old face, Smoky Withers went down. He was dead before he hit the floor. Sneering wolfishly, Rojo Dolan glared through the smoke of his forty-five. His growl was harshly challenging.

"Reckon you all seen somebody give him a gun. And he taken the first shot. Now, if thar's any more of yuh damn, gallows buildin' cowards here—"

He paused expectantly. Over by the bar, a buffalo hunter muttered in his beard. The eyes of a couple of cowmen,

of a blue-coated cavalry sergeant, were narrowed, chill. But they said nothing.

ROJO DOLAN was the deadliest killer in The Flats. To say anything to him now would just be suicide. But somebody did answer—the only person in the Beehive, probably, who could have gotten away with it—Faro Ann!

It had all taken place so quickly that perhaps she had not realized Smoky was meeting the very fate against which she had warned him. But now she came slowly across the cleared floor. There was a queer, twisted smile on her mouth.

"You shouldn't have done it, Rojo," she said softly. "He wasn't your enemy."

"He wouldn't tell who set him tuh buildin' that scaffold; and he taken a shot at me," growled Rojo.

Straightening, he made a show-off gesture before holstering his gun. His free hand lifted the ivory handled Colt from his left holster. There was a sudden blue blur, a double Border shift. Tossing both guns at once, Rojo had transferred his right hand gun to his left hand and his left to his right.

Like most two-gun packers, Rojo Dolan could use one hand much better than the other. His left was faster than most men's best. But his right was his meat hand—the one he depended on. Now he pouched the fully loaded cutter in his right holster while he refueled the other weapon.

"Anyway, thar's my answer tuh these would-be Vigilants," he mouthed. "Yuh notice none of 'em had nerve tuh take up fer him."

Faro Ann didn't answer. She stood there, smiling, pretty as a painting, with the shimmering highlights in her red-gold hair and her slim figure. Here and there in the barroom, honest men frowned.

Hell, it just didn't look right. Faro Ann, standing there, smiling at a damn killer with his victim at her feet. Why, as far as any men were her friends, Smoky and his boy, Jack, had been. She was a puzzle, this strange female.

Her voice actually sound caressing when she spoke again. "But you will be careful, won't you, Rojo? I wouldn't want you shot in the back."

Rojo Dolan blinked, startled. Was Faro Ann, expressing concern for him! Grinning, he swelled.

"Don't yuh worry about me, honey," he swaggered fatuously. "The jigger that can down me jest ain't been foaled yet."

"You'll let Jack Withers alone, then, will you?" cut in Ann.

Rojo's smle faded, was replaced by a scowl. "Lookin' out fer kids, are yuh?" he snarled. "Well, tell the yearlin' tuh stay out uh my sight. I'll think about leavin' him live."

Not waiting for any reply, he turned, strutting out. Her face still unreadable, Faro Ann looked down at the body. Behind her, Denver Joe, the big bartender, cleared his throat nervously.

"We got tuh move him, Miss Ann," he muttered. "Better git back."

"It'll be hard, telling his boy," mused Faro Ann grimly. "And he was expecting Jack in tonight too, he told me."

SHE broke off. A bronzed youngster was pushing his way through the crowd in the doorway. His eyes were anxious as he nodded to Ann. "Say, I—I heard—" he began. And then his voice stopped in a sobbing catch.

He had just seen what was on the floor. Gray-white under his tan, he dropped to his knees. His fingers crept out to touch the dead face. His stricken eyes were wide, staring.

"Why—why, Smoky!" he whispered. "Smoky! Oh, God—"

Through a bright haze of tears he looked up at that cold, beautiful face of the woman above him. "Smoky raised me, yuh know," he murmured dazedly. "Took me in, an orphan kid, after the Injuns had kilt my pappy and mammy. Done everything he could fer me. Thar wasn't no harm in him—"

He came to his feet with a jerk and his voice was suddenly bitter, deadly. "It was Rojo Dolan done it, they say?" he asked confirmation. "Dolan, murdered him?"

Not a muscle in Faro Ann's face moved as she nodded. "But murder may be the wrong word, Jack. Dolan said somebody gave Smoky a gun and Smoky shot first. I didn't see it. But still—"

She shrugged, pointing silently to the rusty weapon lying under Wither's arm. Hunkering down, Jack Withers picked up the gun, examining it with grim eyes.

"Yeah, it's been shot once," he admitted harshly. "But ole Smoky wouldn't uh done it unless made to. And look! Thar's a bullet hole in the floor, where the lead likely went. It was uh frame-up."

As though struck with a sudden thought, he dropped the gun and lifted the dead man's right hand, glaring at the small, dark something in the clenched fingers.

"It *was* a frame-up!" his cry lifted savagely. "Look hyar! They jest fired that gun and th'owed it down beside pore ole' Smoky. He wouldn't uh been shootin' it —and holdin' a nail in the same hand!"

He pulled the blackened bit of iron gently out of the stiffened grip, holding it up. Faro Ann reached out white, dainty fingers to take it from him.

"Nail from that gallows Smoky built this morning, I guess, Jack," she said coldly. "It got him killed. Be careful, or it may do the same for you." Her gaze was inscrutable, thoughtful. "There likely isn't a man in West Texas can match Rojo Dolan with a six-gun."

Jack didn't seem to hear. He gathered the shattered body of his foster father into his arms. When he stood up, his face looked ten years older. It was like weathered granite, bitter, gray. The blue eyes were unseeing.

"I got my wagon close by," he explained in a slow, toneless voice. "In about uh hour, I'll be back."

He paused, staring into nothing with those unseeing eyes.

"If any of yuh see Misteh Dolan, tell him I'll be lookin' for him," he said.

THE bartender, Denver Joe, drew a long, rasping breath. "Yeah and then there'll be two Withers deceased."

"I don't know." The lamplight made a shimmering flame of Faro Ann's red-golden hair. She shook her head, looking thoughtfully at the blackened nail in her hand.

Surprising, the strength in those long, white fingers! The nail had crystallized, perhaps, had become brittle from the roaring heat of the fire. Her fingers twisted it idly. There was a little snap. She had broken the nail in two. The half including the head was now a jagged, needle-sharp splinter, and had slightly pricked her hand.

She held the pricked place to her mouth, abstractedly examining the bit of metal that had caused it. "I think we'd better warn Rojo, anyway," she said slowly. Surprised, the big bartender actually believed he heard a trace of anxiety in her tone. He wondered, had this woman of ice really fallen for that flashy, braggart killer?

It looked that way. She turned quickly, signalling to a staring swamper. "Joey, go see if you can find Rojo Dolan for me, will you?" she asked sweetly. "Tell him I do want to see him. Sometime within the next hour—if he isn't leaving town because of those Vigilantes."

Somebody laughed raucously. "Yeah, I see Rojo runnin' off, jest because uh them," scoffed Denver Joe, his fat face a wide grin. "Yuh know, Ann, I don't think thar's any Vigilantes hyar anyway. I think that gallows was jest some crazy jiggers' fool joke—"

"Pretty serious joke, though, don't you think?" cut in Faro Ann softly.

Faro Ann had turned, going back over to her corner table. She toyed with the cards and after awhile one or two would-be gamesters drifted over, to be met by a shake of the head. Faro Ann wasn't interested in dealing cards tonight.

Perhaps it was thirty minutes before the searching swamper located Rojo in a gambling dive down the street and delivered his message. With a pleased oath, the red gunman cashed in his chips and came immediately.

It was something, to be sent for by Faro Ann. Since her unheralded arrival in Fort Griffin, many men had tried to get on close terms with her. Not a one had succeeded. For, in addition to being icy, this strange beauty carried a dagger in her dress. Several times she had demonstrated her ability to use it, with the speed of a rattler.

She hadn't struck to kill. But men realized she could have. Gambler or not, respectfully, they let her alone.

But now she certainly seemed to have thawed, all of a sudden. She greeted the red gunman with a caressing smile. "Rojo, I'm a little worried about you," she exclaimed. "That Withers boy was here. Said he'd be back, looking for you. He looked wild. Oh, I—I do want you to be careful."

"Worried, about somethin' happenin' tuh me!" Rojo laughed scoffingly. But he was flattered. "Don't fret yoreself, honey. Why I could shoot that mewlin' calf fulla holes with a cannon."

"I know you could." Her eyes were demurely admiring. "But I—oh, I guess I'm just flustered. Won't you—sit here with me awhile, talk to me?"

Swelling, Rojo pulled a chair around beside her. He scowled at his sycophants who had trailed after him. "Fade, yuh bums!" he barked. "Me and the lady crave tuh converse, private."

They backed hastily away. For perhaps a dozen breaths the big, smoky room was hushed, as men stared in furtive surprise. Then, the casual hum of voices, the clink of glasses resumed.

Over against the wall a grizzled cattleman scowled disgustedly. He leaned across the table, to growl into his companion's ear.

"Look at her! Makin' right up tuh that killer! And I thought she was decent!"

"Yuh better put a muzzle on them kind uh sentiments," muttered his partner. "Bellerin' 'em, thataway! Them Vigilants have yet tuh show Rojo he ain't runnin' this burg—if they can show him."

The cowman snarled. "Vigilants? Hell, thar ain't none!"

"Oh, no?" His companion lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "Then who set that pore old jigger tuh buildin' that—"

"That gallows?" The cowman spat indignantly. "Why, a bunch uh fool, drunk hide buyers from Fo't Worth. Tryin' tuh run a whizzer on the camp—tryin' tuh start somethin'." Disgusted wrath glittered in his eyes. "Well, they did. Got that simple, harmless old Smoky Withers kilt. And now thar'll be another killin', shore as hell. Unless'n the kid's got the sense tuh stay away."

"Jack Withers might fool yuh," remarked his companion doubtfully. "They tell me he ain't no slouch of a gunner hisself. He's jest a kid, uh course. But with a little luck—"

"Luck!" The cowman laughed harshly. "Feller, what that button will need tuh

match Rojo Dolan will be a miracle, thet's all!"

His outraged glance stabbed again toward the corner table. He'd thought better of Faro Ann than that. Fussing over a damn gunman, fondling his sleeve, making right up to him. It was disgustin'. She was only a cheap card shark, after all—making her play for Rojo Dolan, warning him to be careful. . . .

THE time crawled by. Behind the bar, Denver Joe looked at his watch for the tenth time. It was past the hour. Maybe Jack Withers had thought better about coming back and dying. Denver hoped so. He didn't want to see any more gun fights, he already had seen a few, and ducking bullets wasn't his idea of fun.

A drunken skinner turned his face toward Dolan, bawling out a ribald comment. "Hey, Rojo! Don't look like yore corpse is comin'. Yuh want us tuh go round the son up, drag him in?"

Rojo stood up, grinning. "I expect the gent is waitin' fer that there Vigilance Committee tuh act," he jeered.

He started to saunter out from behind the table, thumbs hooked in the crossbelts supporting his tied-down holsters. "No, I don't figger there's any use lookin' fer him, or them neither," he drawled sneeringly. "They know who runs this—"

Somebody cried out, a sharp, broken cry. Eyes jerked toward the doorway. Interrupted in mid-sentence, the bragging Rojo stared.

"Me, yuh was waitin' for?" asked a dull, toneless voice. Dull—yet staringly loud in that sudden, deathly silence.

There was the sobbing rasp of somebody's breath. Jack Withers came slowly into the room. His face was a drawn, bitter mask. Only his eyes were alive.

He came across the dirty, littered floor, toward the red gunman. Ten feet away he half-turned, taking two steps sideways, to get the woman behind Rojo out of the line of fire.

"Well, kid?" snarled Dolan. "I see yo're packin' a firearm. Think yo're man enough tuh use it??"

Jack Withers did not answer. He looked at the silent woman. Madam, will yuh leave us?" he asked coldly. "We got business yuh might not want tuh see."

Without a word, Faro Ann, got up, stepped aside. Her ageless, beautiful face was as emotionless as that of a marble statue. But in her eyes as she looked at the tall youngster was—something strange. A hint of bitter, gnawing anxiety, of wistful hunger.

Jack didn't see. He had turned again to Dolan, was addressing him in that dead, whispering husk.

"Dolan, they tell me there ain't no vigilance committee. That gallows was jest some fools' idea of a joke. It wasn't aimed at you particular, but yuh took it so. And yuh murdered a harmless, crippled old man tuh show how brave yuh were. Brave, yeah!"

Rojo Dolan's lips curled at the taunt. "Well, you ain't crippled, are yuh?" he snarled. "If yuh feel big enough tuh take it up, why reach! Any time!"

Jack didn't seem to hear. That grim, whispering voice droned on. "Yuh know, Dolan, Smoky Withers was the only father I ever knowed. You murdered him. There's no law in this town, tuh punish you. Yuh won't be punished—unless I can bring it to yuh, personal."

Jack Withers stepped back, his hand clawing for his gun. His cry rang through the still barroom. "I don't know that I can kill yuh, murderer. But I'm here to try. Go fer yore Colt's, damn you!"

Rojo Dolan's great hands, already lashing for those ivory handled weapons, were red blurs in the gloom. A grin of supreme confidence was on his face. He knew he was so much faster than this

youngster that it would just be a breeze —just one more notch for his record.

Perhaps fifty pairs of staring eyes were watching those two fighters. Yet what occurred was over so fast that not one of those onlookers really saw all that happened. A few of them saw that the holster of Rojo's right gun seemed to jerk crazily under his hand. But the gun did not come out. It was his left gun that lashed up first. And it came up almost but not quite in time to shade Jack Withers' first shot.

Three times, Jack Withers fired—three times roaring blasts, so close together they seemed to blend into one. And then, like an echo, came Rojo Dolan's answer. But the red gunman was going down by then—dead, his face a devil's mask of stupid, incredulous horror. . . .

Through the stunned silence came a strangling, amazed voice. "Well, by the eternal! The younker tuk him! Took Rojo Dolan!"

FOR an instant Jack Withers stared through the coiling powder smoke at the body of his foe. Rojo's right gun, apparently, had hung in its holster. That seemed strange—but lucky, for Jack. He couldn't have matched that right hand and he knew it, now.

A hand dropped on his shoulder. He turned slowly, looking down into Faro Ann's white face. Lovely, cold marble, as always, those features. But this time he did see her eyes. Her whisper was so faint he barely heard it; and he could hardly believe his ears.

"I had a son once, boy. He would have been just about your age, had he lived."

And then, suddenly, it was as though a dull, opaque curtain had dropped behind those eyes. Impersonal, chill, Faro Ann the gambler spoke a curt, final word to him, before casually turning away.

"You've done what you came for, Withers. Better leave, now."

Slowly, Jack turned to obey. In the doorway he paused an instant, his grim eyes passing over the crowd in silent question. Nobody said anything. As he strode away into the night, a low voice addressed him, with growling approval.

"Mebbe thar ain't no Vigilantes in this town yet, hombre. But thar's gonna be, pronto. Yuh done a damn good job—saved us trouble."

In the Beehive a puzzled outlaw was kneeling beside Rojo Dolan's body. "I tell yuh, his meat gun hung," he was protesting. "But how the hell could it, with his holster oiled and—"

He gave a startled, barking cry. "Say, lookut! Look! No wonder it hung, it's nailed in his holster! A nail pushed plumb through the leather!"

Gaping, the crowding bystanders stared. A blackened splinter of a nail had indeed been thrust through the stout leather of the holster, through the trigger guard and slanting deep into the back. It had literally nailed the gun in its scabbard. Rojo's frantic yank had almost torn the weapon free. A second jerk doubtless would have done it. But Rojo hadn't lived that long.

"It—it's that damn gallows nail Faro 'Ann took outa Smoky Withers' hand," somebody recognized. "Hell's bells! Why, she musta worked it through Rojo's holster, somehow, right while he was settin' thar with her!"

"Say, whar is Faro Ann, anyways?"

Nobody knew. She was gone. The gaming tables of The Flats of Fort Griffin would know her no more. Where she came from, where she went—*quien sabe?* The page in the book is blank.

Over against the wall, the old cowman refilled his glass, lifted it high. "Tuh a lady—my respects and apologies," he said solemnly. Then he chuckled.

"Hung him. On uh gallows nail!"

Up The Trail

UP THE TRAIL from the Lazy B lived Old Man Jackson. Some said that he lived on rabbits—or "slow elk," which was just another name for any Lazy B cow that drifted by his little log cabin. But of all the people in Sleepy Valley only Red Burns really knew—and Red was a girl who wouldn't tell.

She didn't remember when old man Jackson moved into that little cabin that was on her property. It must have been about the time of the Sleepy Valley War, when the Lazy B and the Crown fought each other almost to extinction. Her father had been killed. But the Lazy B, cut down to the five year old girl and a peg-legged Chinese range cook, named Ad Sing, won that war. The Crown went bust—and Jake Morgan, its owner, vanished from that land.

Red first met Jackson one day when she was about eight years old and was Injuning through the woods. She was headed for that cabin which she thought was deserted. It was a fort, in her imagination, and she was sneaking up on it to scalp a few pale-faces. Almost at the shack, she burst through the brush yelling her blood-curdling war cry. Then she stopped and stared. And Jackson, as surprised as she, stared back.

They gaped for a while—then smiled and became friends. Jackson made her a bow with some arrows that would really shoot. He made her promise not to tell anyone that she had found him there. She looked at the bow with pride and thanks. She promised.

Gradually Old Man Jackson became less timid about strangers. He had a long white beard, which he seldom trimmed, by the time the girl was twenty, and even went to town now and then to buy flour and beans. Red Burns often rode over to take him one of her own homemade apple pies. Then one day she decided to surprise the oldster again, to Injun up on him as she had that day so long ago.

In the bushes she stopped, cold with dread. Jackson had a visitor. The visitor held a gun in his hand.

"Lucky thing I happened on yuh," the stranger was saying. "I thought yuh was dead, Fagin. It never occurred tuh me that you'd be runnin' the Lazy B."

Dimly the name Fagin struck response in the girl's mind. She remembered hearing how Jake Morgan had hired the greatest gunswift of the day to help him in that Sleepy Valley War

—a man called Fagin . . . .

"You double-crossed me once, Fagin, but you'll never do it again."

"I didn't double-cross you," Jackson said. "When you hired me, you didn't tell me we were fightin' children. I helped you kill that gal's old man. But when I seen the button weepin' over Burn's body I quit my job—Remember?"

"An' then cleaned up on me . . . . That's what *I* call double-cross," the stranger said.

Jackson, alias Fagin, laughed. Then Red Burns, there in the bushes, could see the stranger snarl, reach suddenly for his gun. And Jackson, who was unarmed, laughed in the face of death. . . .

Then Red came out of her paralysis. That old war-whoop came from her tense throat. She ran across the clearing, flung a rock she had in her hand. It took the startled stranger in the face, knocked him back against the building. And by the time he gathered his wits again Jackson was armed.

They buried Jake Morgan up in the hills. Old Man Jackson lived on in that little cabin, well supplied now with beans and flour and haunches of beef. Ah Sing told Red, now that the story could come out, how he had taken orders from Jackson and passed them onto the boys ever since that night so long ago when a gunman had found Red weeping over her father. Fagin, the killer, had atoned through those selfless years for the blood he had shed and the hearts he had broken . . . .

Someday one of our authors will put Killer Fagin into a story, and we'll publish it here, gladly, in the pages of *Star Western*. For Old Man Jackson, alias Fagin, was made of real man-stuff—the kind of gent who made the West the living, vital country we are proud of today!

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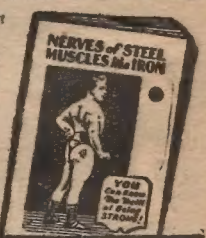

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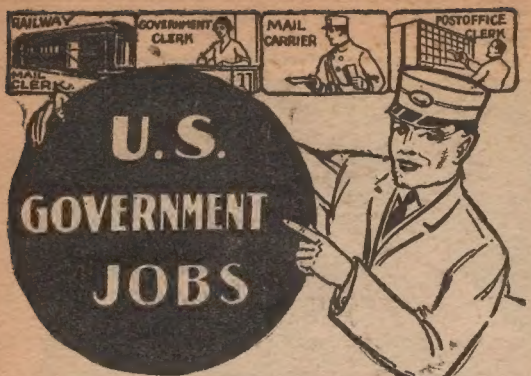

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29x5.00-19	2.65	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
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